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•PART ONE•

~ Follow Aspenpaw and her brothers on their journey through Clan life. But not all cats are cut out for the pressure that is to come...~

Allegiances

ThunderClan

Leader: Doestar- light brown and white she-cat

Deputy: Thornear- black tom with hazel eyes and a torn ear

Medicine Cat: Duskheart- ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes (Apprentice; Aspenpaw)

Warriors:

Mistypool- light gray she-cat with dark gray tabby stripes and amber eyes (Former Apprentice; Aspenpaw)

Littlefrost- gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes (Apprentice; Birchpaw)

Blackheart- black and white tom with green eyes (Apprentice; Graypaw)

Sparkspots- tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Hollyflower- black she-cat with hazel eyes (Apprentice; Juniperpaw)

Jaywatcher- black tom with blue eyes

Kinkclaw- brown and ginger tabby she-cat with white chest and face

Robincloud- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes (Apprentice; Cedarpaw)

Tawnyleaf- brown tabby tom with green eyes

Apprentices:

Juniperpaw- dark brown tabby and white tom with greenish-blue eyes

Aspenpaw- cream and white she-cat with ice-blue eyes and dark cream tabby stripes on face and tail

Cedarpaw- brown tabby and white tom with deep blue eyes

Birchpaw- white she-cat with green eyes and gray tabby stripes on tail

Graypaw- gray tom with amber eyes

Queens:

Goldenfall- long-furred golden-brown she-cat with white chest and green eyes, Blackheart is the father of her kits, Whitekit (white tom with ginger tabby patches) and Deerkit (brown she-kit with white flecks and ear tips)

Elders:

Redfang- gray and white tom with amber eyes

ShadowClan

Leader: Rainstar- gray and white tom

Deputy: Squirrelpelt- cream tom (Apprentice; Skypaw)

Medicine Cat: Redsplash- white she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors:

Tallfur- gray tom (Apprentice; Puddlepaw)

Blizzardflame- brown tabby she-cat with white flecks

Tigergaze- ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Cherryfur- russet tabby tom (Apprentice; Oakpaw)

Dovemist- cream she-cat with green eyes (Apprentice; Snowpaw)

Darkmoon- very dark gray tom with amber eyes and a white marking on chest and white one forepaw

Queens:

Kestrelfoot- brown she-cat with white paws, Tigergaze is the father of her kits, Morningkit (brown she-kit), Swiftkit (ginger tom with white paws) , and Ashkit (brown she-kit with dark brown flecks)

Elders:

Harespots- tortoiseshell and light brown she-cat with amber eyes

Crowheart- black she-cat with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader: Harestar- white tom with brown tabby patches

Deputy: Fawntail- black and white she-cat with ginger-tipped tail (Apprentice; Amberpaw)

Medicine Cat: Firepool- ginger she-cat (Apprentice; Minnowpaw)

Warriors:

Sandheart- black tom with yellow eyes

Duskspots- white she-cat with tortoiseshell patches and amber eyes (Apprentice; Brackenpaw)

Crookedwing- ginger she-cat

Dapplesplash- white she-cat with orange spots (Apprentice; Olivepaw)

Crystalflame- russet tabby she-cat with green eyes (Apprentice; Mallowpaw)

Frozenheart- gray tabby she-cat (Apprentice; Snowpaw)

Silverleaf- white she-cat with green eyes(Apprentice; Jaggedpaw)

Addertuft- gray tabby she-cat with hazel eyes and white chest, face, paws, and tail-tip

Elders:

Heathermoon- Siamese she-cat with icee blue eyes

RiverClan

Leader: Waterstar- gray she-cat with dark gray flecks and yellow eyes

Deputy: Ryefeather- ginger tom with silvery-blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Skybreeze- gray tom with sky-blue eyes

Warriors:

Lilyfoot- black she-cat with four white paws and blueish-lilac eyes (Apprentice; Redpaw)

Seaear- light gray tom with white ear tips (Apprentice; Mosspaw)

Dovefoot- gray tom with white paws (Apprentice; Lightpaw)

Irisstream- white she-cat with reddish-lilac eyes

Robinheart- russet tabby tom with white chest

Sedgedawn- gray tom with amber eyes

Echomist- blue-gray tabby she-cat (Apprentice; Cherrypaw)

Elders:

Sorrelfeather- brown and white she-cat

Chapter One

[image]

"Go," Aspenpaw bounded through the trees at her mentor's signal. *This is it, my first ever assessment.* A sinking feeling tugged at her. Nothing felt right as she raced through ThunderClan territory, slowing to a stop as she reached the lake. The black water lapped at the stone-covered shore. A warm green-leaf breeze rippled the surface.

Aspenpaw lifted her muzzle, taking in the scent of mouse with her jaws. She spotted it scuffling through the grass near the roots of a beech tree. Aspenpaw crouched. She stalked forward on light paws. Then she pounced, landing clumsily to one side of the mouse. It squeaked in fear and darted away. Aspenpaw scrambled after it, catching it a couple heartbeats later and giving it the killing bite. She swished her tail in satisfaction.

Aspenpaw glanced up at the clear blue sky. The bright sun shined brightly. Aspenpaw sighed. Her father, Jaywatcher, wanted her to become a medicine cat apprentice. Aspenpaw loved the idea of herbs and speaking with StarClan, but she just couldn't stand the blood. A thought struck her. *But being a warrior means causing blood to spill in battle.*

She turned her attention back to the sky above. Something caught Aspenpaw's eyes. A small red object was falling from the sky. *A leaf?* But it was green-leaf, so the leaves couldn't be red yet. So what was it..?

It drifted in the slight breeze, gliding slowly to the ground. It landed softly before Aspenpaw. She reached down, touching it lightly with her nose. A rose petal. Aspenpaw cocker her head. Why would a rose petal fall from the sky. She shook herself. The assessment. Her focus should be on the assessment.

Aspenpaw turned, tail swishing. She scraped dirt over her prey, and trotted toward the heart of the forest, leaving the rose petal to flutter in the wind.

•*I know this chapter was a little short, but I wanted to post something today and this is what I came up with. I want to let you guys know this*

story is just for fun so there will be some mistakes along the way and the story line won't be perfect. But please, enjoy!•
~Aspen

Chapter Two

[image]

Jaywatcher nudged Aspenpaw through the bramble screen to the medicine cat den. She shivered. Her father was making her ask to become the medicine cat apprentice, but Aspenpaw wasn't sure that's where her heart really lie.

A ginger tabby sat by a trickling pool, sorting through different leaves. Her green eyes drew from her work to be placed on the cream-and-white apprentice that had entered her den. Jaywatcher padded in after Aspenpaw.

"What can I do for you two?" Duskheart's tone was brisk, no hint of suspicion at all in it.

Jaywatcher flicked his tail over his daughter's cheek. Aspenpaw shuffled her paws, casting her gaze to the stone floor. *This isn't what I want.* Jaywatcher's blue eyes flickered with sternness.

"Aspenpaw told me about her love of herbs," Jaywatcher started, glancing at Aspenpaw, who stiffened. "She said how she would just enjoy learning about them and getting to know StarClan as well."

I hadn't told him any of that. Aspenpaw inwardly felt heat rising in her throat, but she kept her breathing steady and gaze emotionless. She was great at hiding her feelings.

Sometimes other cats hardly seemed to take any notice to her. She was used to it. She actually liked it, being alone in her own little world.

Duskheart stood and turned to face the cats before her. "And?"

"And..." Jaywatcher seemed to be hinting at Aspenpaw.

"And I want to become your apprentice," she blurted. *Mouse-brain! Control yourself.* Although, something inside her tingled.

And then she was back in the forest, gazing up in the blue sky as a soft rose petal fell to her paws. The vision seemed so real that she closed her eyes, but when she opened them, Aspenpaw found herself staring into the startled eyes of Duskheart.

"Well I suppose I could arrange something... How about you show me just how interested in herbs you really are, Aspenpaw?"

Aspenpaw perked her ears.

"Can you help me with this herb sorting?"

She nodded. As Aspenpaw turned to follow Duskheart to the pool, she caught her father leaving the den, bramble tendrils swishing as they closed behind his black pelt.

Chapter Three

[image]

Aspenpaw pushed through the brambles of the medicine cat den and padded into the camp clearing. Her paws ached. She had just finished helping Duskheart sort through her herbs. Aspenpaw entered the apprentice den to see her two brothers asleep in her nest along with Graypaw and Birchpaw.

She curled up in her nest between Juniperpaw and Cedarpaw, her two brothers, and let the dusk-light lull at her to sleep.

Aspenpaw opened her eyes upon darkness from the night. She was in an unfamiliar nest. Aspenpaw studied her surroundings and realized she was in the medicine cat den, with Duskheart sleeping across from her. *How did I get here?*

Aspenpaw stood from the nest and walked up to Duskheart. *I hate to wake her, but I want to know why I'm in here.* She shrugged, reaching down to prod her medicine cat with a claw. She didn't budge.

"Duskheart?" Aspenpaw whispered in the ginger tabby's ear. "*Duskheart!"*

Duskheart didn't stir. Aspenpaw grumbled, stalking out of the den. *I'll go sleep in my own den. I bet my father is the one behind this.* Before she could reach the bramble den, a mist clouded suddenly in front of her, blocking her from the apprentice den.

Aspenpaw gasped. A starry cat appeared before her, with a gray pelt and blue eyes flecked with brown. *A StarClan cat?*

*"*Who are you?" Aspenpaw let questions pour out of her. "Why are you here? And why wouldn't Duskheart wake up?"

The gray tom placed his tail over Aspenpaw's mouth. *Sorry.* "It's good to finally meet you, Aspenpaw." He purred. "Follow me."

As the gray tom started padding toward the thorn tunnel, Aspenpaw noticed he left a trail of dim stars behind him, falling from his starry paws. *Must be StarClan.* Aspenpaw bounded after him. As they padded through the woods, the trees started to thin out and give way to a clearing. Aspenpaw recognized it instantly. *The training hollow.*

The gray StarClan warrior spun around to face Aspenpaw. "See that rock?" He nodded to a huge flat rock at the edge of the

clearing. "I want you to go up on it and wait once you get there."

Aspenpaw cocker her head. The StarClan warrior smiled at her as if she didn't understand, then waved his tail at the rock invitingly. She padded up to it hesitantly, before making a clumsy jump to sit on top. Aspenpaw steadied her self, then looked down to find the StarClan warrior.

He was gone. She searched the clearing with ice-blue eyes. *Where did he-?* Before she could finish the thought, a heavy weight bowled her over, making her land at the edge of the rock.

"Show me your fighting skills," the gray warrior hissed in her ear. "Try to stay on this rock!"

Aspenpaw growled. She reared up, shaking the small gray tom off of her and batting at his ears with sheathed claws. The gray tom stepped sideways, diving at Aspenpaw and unbalancing her as he hit her shoulder.

Aspen felt herself slide across the rock, coming too close to the edge. She struggled to get up as she teetered by the edge. Aspenpaw lost her footing, falling to the soft grass below.

The gray tom jumped down from the rock, landing neatly beside her. "My name is Driftfrost." He purred in amusement as Aspenpaw staggered to her paws. "Exactly what I thought. It looks like you aren't too great at that." He murmured half to himself.

Aspenpaw shook herself. "What? Fighting?" She shrugged. No one needed to tell her that. She already knew it. She was better at hunting, although she still wasn't too great at it either. She was really fast though. Probably faster than a WindClan apprentice her age.

Her brother Cedarpaw was the one that was good in battle. He was also great at climbing trees. Juniperpaw was best at hunting. *I might not be great at battle moves or hunting, but I'm a fast learner.*

She looked up to meet Driftfrost's gaze. "I know. The only thing I'm good at is running."

She left out the part about being a fast learner. He probably wouldn't believe it the way that she had fought, but it was true.

"Your father's right," Driftfrost stated suddenly. "You're ready, Aspenpaw."

A glint of confusion sparked in Aspenpaw's eyes. *Ready for what?*

Chapter Four

[image]

Aspenpaw watched as Duskheart bounded up the tumble of rocks to reach Highledge. Her yowl caught the attention of cats, making them gather in interest.
"I'm calling a Clan meeting with permission from Doestar," the light brown leader emerged from her den at the call of her name, nodding at Duskheart briskly before sitting down beside her.
"Cats of ThunderClan, it is time I take on an apprentice." Fear sparked through Aspenpaw. *She means me.* She caught her father's proud blue gaze at the edge of her vision. He nodded in satisfaction at her, eyes sparkling with pride.
"I have chosen a cat who has shown thoughtfulness and determination. Your next medicine cat will be Aspenpaw." The ginger tabby smiled, waving her tail at Aspenpaw to come up.
She bounded up to Highledge, jumping clumsy, almost loosing her footing. Her ears grew hot with embarrassment.
Doestar stood. "Aspenpaw, do you accept the post of apprentice to Duskheart?"
Aspenpaw trembled. *No.* She gave a fake smile. "I d-do."
Duskheart gave a smile back, a *real* one. "Then at half-moon you will travel with me to the Moonpool to be accepted by StarClan."
"The good wishes of ThunderClan go with you," Doestar dipped her head formally to Aspenpaw. She nodded her thanks, turning to touch noses with her new mentor.
Excitement buzzed through the Clan below. "Aspenpaw! Aspenpaw!" She heard Jaywatcher cheer the loudest of all the cats, his blue eyes bright.

Once Aspenpaw reached the bottom of the tumble of rocks, Cedarpaw padded up to her. Excitement flared in his deep blue eyes. "You're a medicine cat apprentice!"
Aspenpaw only nodded, giving him a thankful flick of her tail over his ears.
"Have you grown in interest in herbs? I hadn't really noticed,"

Cedarpaw's brown tabby fur fluffed up. His eyes reflected moonlight.

No surprise. No one seems to notice me anyways. She shrugged. She rather liked the loneliness. Her closest friends were her two brothers. Other than that, she liked to keep to herself. Aspenpaw only gave a smile to Cedarpaw before turning away to her new den.

Before she could reach it, Cedarpaw called out to her. "Are you doing okay, Aspenpaw?"

She stopped. "Fine. Just fine." Her stomach twisted at the lie.

A hard wind stirred her fur. The branches above clattered. Clouds blew over the dark sky. Aspenpaw shivered.

Chapter Five

[image]

Aspenpaw sat outside the bramble screen of the medicine cat den, waiting for Duskheart to come out. Cats gathered around Thornear, their deputy, in the middle of the clearing. His hazel eyes looked over the cats.
"Hollyflower, Jaywatcher, Kinkclaw, Juniperpaw, and Tawnyleaf will attend the Gathering," he announced. "Along with Doestar, the medicine cats, me, and the elders, of course."
Duskheart appeared through the bramble screen.
Thornear opened his jaws to speak again. "Blackheart?" The black and white warrior stepped forward. "You can be in control while we're gone." Blackheart nodded at his brother.
Doestar leaped from Highledge. She flicked her tail. "Let's go."
~•~•~•~•~•~•~

"Hey, Aspenpaw," Juniperpaw caught up to her as ThunderClan padded toward the island. "Race you to the tree-bridge!" Her brother bolted.

Aspenpaw couldn't help but let her paws thunder after him. Juniperpaw's long legs thrusted out, but Aspenpaw's strides came quicker, and she sped past him. They skidded to a stop in the mud.

"You're quick!" Juniperpaw panted.

Aspenpaw could only nod, breathless. They waited for their Clanmates before leaping onto the tree-bridge. Aspenpaw followed her brother, jumping to land awkwardly after him.
In the clearing, cats of all four Clans milled around, gossiping and sharing tongues. A soft tail was laid lightly over Aspenpaw's shoulders. She turned to face Duskheart. "Come and greet the other medicine cats."
She followed her mentor, keeping her head low. Shyness crept at her feelings. *I hate meeting new cats. What's the point? No one pays attention to me anyways, whether we've been introduced or not.*
A white she-cat talked with a gray tom. A ginger she-cat sat with a slightly smaller white tom. Duskheart waved her tail. "Greetings," she dipped her head. "This is my new apprentice, Aspenpaw."
The gray tom murmured greetings. "I'm Skybreeze, RiverClan's

medicine cat."
The ginger she-cat stood. "My name is Firepool. I'm from WindClan," she lay her tail on the white tom's back. "This is Minnowpaw." He nodded.
The white she-cat bounced up, amber eyes flaring with excitement. "I'm Redsplash! I belong to ShadowClan!"
Aspenpaw dipped her head away awkwardly. A yowl came from the oak tree. Aspenpaw settled herself a distance away from the other medicine cats.
A gray she-cat with dark flecks stood, RiverClan's leader. "Prey is running well," Waterstar reported. "And Redshade was made a warrior."

"Redshade! Redshade!" The Clans welcomed the young tom with encouraging chants. He puffed out his black fur in pride, amber eyes gleaming. Waterstar sat down.

Doestar stood in her turn. "We have a new medicine cat apprentice," she gazed out over the gathered cats. "Aspenpaw, may StarClan travel with you."

Murmurs of agreement came before chanting rose out. "Aspenpaw! Aspenpaw!" She ducked her head, ears hot.

Harestar rose, his skinny WindClan frame outlined in moonlight. "Our Clan has also welcomed warriors. Jaggedswirl and Snowleap!"

Aspenpaw turned to look at the new warriors. A black and white tom stood with a pure white she-cat. The Tom's copper eyes reflected moonlight. If there was any chanting, Aspenpaw didn't hear it. She was too focused on the handsome WindClan tom.

A hard wind blew. Shadows covered the blue-silver moon.

Chapter Six

[image]

Aspenpaw pushed through the brambles into a small clearing after Duskheart's ginger pelt. A structure with rich undergrowth around it stood in the clearing. *The abandoned Twoleg nest.*
An unfamiliar herb grew bountifully around it. Duskheart padded up to the green leafy herbs and touched a stem with her nose. "This is catmint," she explained. "Do you know what it's for?"
Aspenpaw's insides dropped. She twitched her whiskers. She remembered in leaf-bare when Graypaw had come down with greencough. Duskheart had given him a herb with a lot of leaves. Aspenpaw studied the catmint. *It* does *have a lot of leaves...*
"Is it for coughing?" Aspenpaw whispered. "Like greencough?"
Aspenpaw saw Duskheart twitch her whiskers in satisfaction. She gave a pleased nod. "Watch how I pick it," she reached her head down, plucking it gently by the stem.
"Gather some like I did and meet me back at camp," Duskheart gathered her bundle in her jaws, trotting out of the clearing.
Aspenpaw bent down, trying to pick the soft herbs as gently as she could. The sound of rustling came to Aspenpaw's ears. She swept her eyes around the clearing. A unique-colored tabby stepped into the clearing, her ginger and black stripes glistening in the sun.
"How are you today?" Kinkclaw asked her daughter. Aspenpaw gave a small nod, jaws clamped around the herbs.
Her gaze softened. "I saw the way you looked when you were made the medicine cat apprentice," Kinkclaw's voice was soothing. "Do you really want this? I know Jaywatcher can be a burden, but he only wants the best for you."
Aspenpaw shifted her paws, gaze dropping. Kinkclaw sat down. Aspenpaw stayed standing, not wanting to talk at the moment. *Duskheart is waiting for me.*
Aspenpaw felt a comforting tail across her shoulders. Aspenpaw met her mother's amber eyes.
She gave a small smile. "Follow your heart, Aspenpaw. That's all that matters."
Aspenpaw gave a great-full nod before turning away. She padded

through the brambles. Once out of sight from Kinkclaw, Aspenpaw bounded lightly toward camp. A weird feeling tickled her insides. The night of the last Gathering filled her mind. The full silver moon. Chants calling *his* name. Those wonderful copper eyes. Aspenpaw's mother's words echoed in her head. *What if my heart doesn't belong in ThunderClan at all?*

Chapter Seven

[image]

The small cream she-cat trailed silently behind two tabby toms; one darker brown and skinnier than the other. Juniperpaw's long legs and thin frame made him look meek in comparison with his broad shouldered brother who's muscles ripple under his fur as he walked.

These traits made Cedarpaw great in battle, and amazing at climbing trees. Juniperpaw's skill was hunting. He was also good at making strategies. Both toms were very different, yet both would make great warriors one day or even deputies.

Aspenpaw on the other hand was small. She was light on her paws which only helped the fact that she was very swift. *I bet I could outrun a WindClan warrior apprentice!* Aspenpaw padded on after her litter-mates.

It seemed like her only skills were being a fast learning and running. Learning quickly would help with her medicine cat training, but what about her speed? Any warrior would trade fast learning for speed. *To bad I don't get to use my swiftness to benefit the Clan.*

Aspenpaw's thoughts were cut off as she stumbled into Cedarpaw. The toms had stopped. Aspenpaw felt embarrassment well up inside her. One of her faults was clumsiness. *Maybe it's a good thing I won't be a warrior after all.*

The three apprentices had come into a clearing. Two other cats awaited their presence. A gray tom and a white she-cat. Graypaw looked around to make sure no other cat was around.

"Did you make sure your mentors were too busy to notice your absence?" Cedarpaw asked Graypaw and Birchpaw.

Birchpaw's gray-striped tail twitched. "Yes. Littlefrost went hunting and Blackheart went on the evening patrol. What about your mentors?"

Aspenpaw gave a slight shiver. Her brothers had forced her to come with them. They said they had needed her help. Suspicion pricked at her paws. Why did Graypaw and Birchpaw need to get away from their mentors?

"Hollyflower and Robincloud went hunting together, and Duskheart was busy sorting through herbs," Juniperpaw replied.

"Good," Graypaw gave a nod of satisfaction. "We're ready then." *Ready for what?* Aspenpaw's pelt tickled with apprehension. What were these young apprentices planning?

"Okay, here's the plan," Juniperpaw unsheathed his claws. He took one claw and dragged it through the loose dirt to draw a semi-circle. "This is the stone hollow."

The dark tabby tom drew a bigger full circle nearby. "This is the lake." He then drew four lines coming out from the lake. "And these are the borders."

Aspenpaw inwardly gasped. She had begun to understand what was about to take place.

"We will sneak through the undergrowth until we reach the stream which marks ShadowClan's border," Juniperpaw explained. "We will use the shadows from the pine trees to sneak into their camp."

"And once we get there we will take back what is rightfully ours!" Cedarpaw growled.

Bewilderment pulsed through Aspenpaw. *What is rightfully ours? Did ShadowClan steal something from ThunderClan?* Aspenpaw wanted no part in this.

Birchpaw had noticed Aspenpaw's confusion in her expression. "Graypaw and Cedarpaw were out on a team hunting exercise. They were chasing a blackbird that flew right over the border-"

"And into the claws of a ShadowClan Fox-heart!" Graypaw snarled. "Our mentors didn't witness this because they were waiting by the lake."

"And now we must retrieve what rightfully belongs to ThunderClan," Cedarpaw hissed. "And Aspenpaw will be our bait."

Chapter Eight

[image]

A chilly leaf-fall breeze stirred Aspenpaw's and the surrounding apprentice's fur. The slight wind chilled Aspenpaw to the bones. But mostly the words Cedarpaw had just spoken made her shiver. The wind was only a small factor of the iciness Aspenpaw felt course through her veins.

Determined eyes blinked at her expectantly. Shadows started to fall as dusk arrived over the small clearing which was sheltered by ferns and bramble thickets.

Cedarpaw's deep blue gaze was seeking an answer. "So?" The brown tabby tom prompted.

Aspenpaw hesitated. *If I do this I'd be in huge trouble. And it isn't the way to solve this situation. Graypaw and Cedarpaw should tell their mentors.* But then she remembered her thoughts from only a moment ago. *If I do this I would be using my speed to benefit the Clan. And if we are successful the Clan would be so proud; my father might stay out of my fur for once about being a medicine cat.*

Aspenpaw shook herself, steadying her gaze with Cedarpaw's. "I can't." Birchpaw gasped. Cedarpaw hissed. Juniperpaw shook his head. Graypaw shouldered past Cedarpaw to tower over Aspenpaw.

He twitched his whiskers. "Why? Are you scared?" Graypaw paused a moment, but Aspenpaw didn't reply.

He circled slowly around the cream she-cat. "A medicine cat apprentice scared to go on a warrior mission." Graypaw leaned close to Aspenpaw's ear and whispered, "Figures."

Aspenpaw wasn't ruffled by Graypaw's words. *He's just an arrogant apprentice, trying to intimidate me to get what he wants.* She searched the eyes of the other apprentices around her. *They all only want me here to use me. If any other cat had my speed I wouldn't be here.*

Aspenpaw twitched her ears. She didn't let her eyes narrow or fur rise; she only looked up to the broad-shouldered gray tom with a challenge in her ice-blue eyes. "I won't."

Aspenpaw kept her expression calm and eyes steady. "And neither should you." She turned on her paws and dashed toward the

ThunderClan camp, away from the clearing that held the startled apprentices.

Chapter Nine

[image]

Excited squealing reached Aspenpaw's ears. She blinked open her eyes and stood up slowly in her nest. Duskheart's nest was empty. *Why is she up so early?* Dawn light trickled through the bramble tendrils. Aspenpaw pushed through them, into the ThunderClan camp.
Cats were gathered beneath Highledge, eyes gleaming and on the nursery. The rising orange sun creeped over the horizon, setting the cats's fur alight with yellow and orange hues.
Goldenfall, a golden-brown queen, led her two kits out of the nursery. Whitekit padded after his mother with confidence shinning in his green eyes. Whitekit's white and ginger patched fur was neatly groomed. Deerkit followed more shyly, her white-flecked pelt groomed just as nicely as her brother's.
Realization dawned on Aspenpaw as Doestar leaped down the Highledge to stand in front of the two kits. "I have called this meeting because it is about time that Whitekit and Deerkit were assigned to mentors."
Aspenpaw noticed Whitekit bounce up in down in excitement. Doestar reached out with her tail to beckon to Deerkit with her tail. Deerkit hesitated, fear in her amber eyes, before padding forward nervously.
"From this time forward," Doestar announced. "This kit will be known as Deerpaw. Kinkclaw, you have shown bravery and loyalty and I trust that you will pass on these qualities to your apprentice."
Kinkclaw stepped forward, eyes shinning with pride, to touch her nose to the shy Deerpaw. Kinkclaw guided Deerpaw with her tail back into the crowd of cats.
Doestar turned her attention to Whitekit; the kit bounced to Doestar's paws, excitement making his tail twitch. Meows of amusement erupted around Aspenpaw, and she couldn't help but smile.
Doestar reached out with her tail to touch Whitekit's shoulder. "From this time forward, this kit will be known as Whitepaw," she declared. "Thornear will mentor this kit and do his best to train him

to be a great warrior."
The black deputy padded up to touch noses with Whitepaw. Meows of approval sounded around the camp as the apprentices were made. As the meowing faded, the cats began to break apart, but before they could fully retreat to their duties, Thornear yowled for the Clan's attention.
The black deputy waved his tail to beckon a gray tabby she-cat out of the crowd. "I have some news to share with you all."
The small gray tabby she-cat shifted on her paws uncomfortably. Thornear laid his tail across her shoulders reassuringly.
"Littlefrost is having her first litter of kits," Thornear announced.
Yowls of congratulation rose from the clearing.
Littlefrost's blue eyes were shinning. "They will be born in about half a moon or so."
Goldenfall padded up to give the new queen's ears a lick. Littlefrost dipped her head gratefully. Thornear rubbed his muzzle on his mate's shoulder. The Clan started to break apart again, this time no interruption came to keep the cats from their duties.

"Aspenpaw, wait up!" Aspenpaw turned around to see a white cat plunge through the thorn tunnel after her.
Birchpaw's green eyes were glazed with gratefulness. Aspenpaw padded on. *Why would anyone want to speak to me? I'm a loner, and I like to keep it that way.*
Birchpaw kept pace with Aspenpaw as she padded through the trees. "You know what you did yesterday day was brave, standing up to my brother like that."
Aspenpaw grunted in reply, but felt her fur tingle. *No one has ever called me brave, let alone even notice me at all.*
"They never did continue their plan," Birchpaw continued, green eyes sparkling. "You convinced them it was wrong."
Aspenpaw stopped. She let her blue eyes meet Birchpaw's. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I shouldn't have agreed to be a part of it. You were very confident and I wish I had thought more like you had."
Aspenpaw felt shock pulse through her veins, but she hid her feelings behind her masked expression. She found the strength to give a small nod, not meeting Birchpaw's green eyes.
"Gotta go," Birchpaw bounded back toward camp, green foliage that matched the color of her eyes swishing around her as she left.

Chapter Ten

[image]

Two moons had passed since Deerpaw and Whitepaw were made apprentices. Littlefrost's kits had been delivered: two toms. Birchpaw's apprenticeship had been taken over by Doestar when her mentor had kitted.
Littlefrost's kits were just one moon old. The first tom was named Cinderkit; he was black and white with blue eyes. His brother was named Echokit; gray-furred with hazel eyes.

Aspenpaw's tail twitched as she watched the camp clearing. The afternoon leaf-fall sun washed over the lake territories, warming the backs of sun-bathing cats. Redfang, the ThunderClan elder, groomed his gray-and-white fur outside his den.

Aspenpaw padded up to him, ears twitching. Duskheart had told her that Redfang's time was nearing an end. The elder had become stiff over the past moon, and he was slowing down more and more every passing day.

Redfang stopped grooming to look up at Aspenpaw, amber eyes narrowed. "What do you want?" He rasped.

Aspenpaw dropped her gaze slightly. "I'm here to check on you; orders from Duskheart. Are you feeling sore or stiff today?"

Redfang snorted, then paused another heartbeat before nodding. "My hind legs have been giving me some trouble lately."

Redfang stretched out his hind legs to let Aspenpaw inspect them. She ran her paws down his thin frame, feeling the stiffness in his legs. Aspenpaw sat down beside the elder, massaging his stiff muscles in hope they would loosen up.

Redfang's raspy breathing eased up and Aspenpaw felt him begin to relax. After a moment he let out a long sigh. "Thank you, Aspenpaw. That feels better."

Aspenpaw nodded, turning to pad towards the nursery. Duskheart was out collecting herbs and she had given Aspenpaw a few tasks while she was gone.

Aspenpaw pushed through the brambles into the nursery where Littlefrost fed her young kits. "How are they doing?"

Littlefrost looked up, eyes shinning. "They're doing great, thank

you. Kits are just so precious." The gray tabby queen curled up around her kits, breathing growing heavier as she drifted into sleep.

Pain seared Aspenpaw's heart as she watched the small kits sleep with their mother. A claw seemed to rake her insides as she realized she would never be a mother, never have a mate, never love; never be loved.

Aspenpaw turned away, and met the eyes of Graypaw who was outside the apprentice den. His amber gaze was sharp, hatred burning in them. Aspenpaw let herself shiver. She plucked a vision from her memories; handsome copper eyes gazing at something in the distance under a sparkling full moon.

She needed him. She needed to get away from being unnoticed, being unloved. She needed to escape; she needed freedom.

Chapter Eleven

[image]

Dim dawn light filtered through the covers of the trees above. Aspenpaw pushed through the thorn tunnel after her ginger-colored mentor. They had just returned from a trip to the Moonpool. Aspenpaw had only dreamed of running through star-lit fields under a purple sky.

Duskheart stopped to turn and face Aspenpaw. "Lets go check on Redfang. I'm worried about his stiffness." Grief showed in Duskheart's green eyes.

Aspenpaw felt something inside her twist at Duskheart's expression. Redfang was Duskheart's father; along with Goldenfall, Mistypool, and Littlefrost.

Duskheart padded into the elder den. The gray and white tom lay on his side, chest heaving. Duskheart hurried to her father's side.

"My chest is... And my legs are..." Redfang rasped, but couldn't quite finish his explanation.

"Aspenpaw, go fetch some daisy leaves and coltsfoot," Duskheart ordered. "Hurry!"

Aspenpaw scrambled out of the den in urgency to get the herbs. Redfang hadn't looked very good. *I hope he'll be okay.*

Aspenpaw skidded to a halt and reached into the herb store cleft. She grabbed as many bundles as she could, mostly of coltsfoot, and dashed back into Redfang's den.

"Chew that into a paste," Duskheart shoved the daisy leaves in front of Aspenpaw and started chewing up the coltsfoot. "When you're done apply it to his stiff legs."

Redfang's breathing grew heavier and his amber eyes started to slowly close. Duskheart nudged the coltsfoot pulp toward Redfang. "Eat it," Duskheart insisted. Redfang groaned. "It will make you feel better."

Aspenpaw watched Redfang lap up the pulp as she applied her paste busily. The gray and white elder lay his head down heavily. Duskheart sat back and took a deep breath.

"It's in StarClan's paws, now."

Chapter Twelve

[image]

Aspenpaw pushed through the thorn tunnel that led out of camp. She followed Blackheart and his apprentice Graypaw. The moon rose above their heads as they padded through the forest. Aspenpaw turned her head up to the stars. *Redfang is up there now, hunting peacefully with StarClan.*
She sighed. *We did our best. It was his time, and he's not in pain anymore.* Duskheart was sitting vigil, along with her littermates, for her father. She had asked Blackheart to take Aspenpaw with Graypaw to do a training session.
"Why?" Aspenpaw had asked. "Medicine cats don't fight."
"No, but they need to learn to defend themselves just in case," Duskheart had replied, grooming Redfang's body for burial, eyes glazed with grief.
Aspenpaw snapped out of her thoughts as she realized they had reached the training hollow.
Blackheart turned to face Aspenpaw. "Right," he started. "First I want you to pretend Graypaw is a ShadowClan warrior that's attacking you. You are a ThunderClan warrior. I want you to fight back as best as you can "
Aspenpaw nodded nervously. She was a lousy fighter, even worse than her hunting skills. She watched as Graypaw got ready to spring at her. Something seemed off, though. There was a suspicious glint of hatred in the gray tom's amber eyes.
Graypaw leaped at Aspenpaw. Aspenpaw dodged aside, Graypaw barely missing her fur, and landed clumsily in the tall grass. Her paws flailed in the air as she scrambled to get up.
Aspenpaw felt paws rake across her exposed belly. Although his claws were sheathed, Graypaw's blows were hard and unforgiving. Aspenpaw grunted. She managed to find her footing and reared up to leap on top of Graypaw, battering at his back with her hind legs. A gleam of satisfaction was sent through Aspenpaw, but she gasped in surprise when Graypaw rolled over.
The gray tom put his heavy paws over her chest. Aspenpaw wriggled, but couldn't get free. Graypaw leaned his head close to

Aspenpaw's ear.
"I'll never forget what you *didn't* do for me," he hissed. "ShadowClan deserved punishment. But it's too late for that, so someone else has to get it."
Aspenpaw gasped in horror as Graypaw raised his paw. A silver gleam from the moon caught his claws and set them shinning. As he brought down his claws, Aspenpaw closed her eyes, bracing for the blow. Time seemed to move slower.
"Graypaw, no!" Blackheart's shocked yowl hit Aspenpaw's ears.
But Graypaw didn't listen. Something warm trickled down Aspenpaw's left shoulder before she even realized how much it stung. She opened her eyes on a face of satisfaction. Graypaw was shoved off of her by his mentor and scolded, but Aspenpaw didn't catch what Blackheart had told him.
Blackheart rushed over to her side, helping her to stand. "Are you alright, Aspenpaw?"
Time sped back up to normal, leaving Aspenpaw panting with a stinging crimson shoulder. She dared look at it, and suddenly realized how deep the cut was. *If I didn't know any better, that's going to leave a scar.*
"I'm fine," she replied. "Just take me back to camp."
Blackheart hobbled Aspenpaw out of the training hollow, with Graypaw trailing behind. She turned back to look at him, and suddenly wished she hadn't.
His broad frame followed in pursuit, amber eyes glistening with satisfaction; his single paw stained with scarlet blood.

Chapter Thirteen

[image]

A leaf-fall breeze stirred the cats's fur in the stone hollow. Orange leaves swirled in the overcast sky as they fell to the ground. A cream she-cat padded up to the fresh kill pile, ice-blue eyes searching for a good piece of food.
A scar marked her left shoulder, although healed, would never go away. The she-cat was almost 12 moons old now. Her two brothers had recently been made warriors: Junipermoon and Cedarroar. Aspenpaw bent down her head to pick up a plump mouse, and then turned to pad back to her den. The sound of the youngest apprentices made her stop.

"I can't wait for our battle training session today," Whitepaw mewed, green eyes bubbling with excitement.

Deerpaw nodded her head in agreement. Their mentors padded over, Thornear and Kinkclaw, and led them through the thorn tunnel.

Aspenpaw started again toward her den. Once there, she dropped the mouse at Duskheart's paws; who was sorting through dusty herbs. Dusk started to fall over the clearing. Aspenpaw's paws ached with tiredness.

"Get some rest," Duskheart suggested, nodding her head at the soft moss nest.

Aspenpaw didn't refuse, curling up and drifting off almost immediately.

Aspenpaw woke to find herself looking out over the moor from a rise. A familiar gray tom with blue eyes sat next to her. *Driftfrost!* She knew this cat. He had visited her the night before she was made the medicine cat apprentice.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Driftfrost waved his tail to the open moor, stars shinning above.

Aspenpaw nodded. Then confusion hit her. "Why didn't you visit me at the Moonpool?"

Driftfrost gave a small chuckle. "Because this is important *now."*

Aspenpaw was still confused but decided not to ask anymore

questions. Aspenpaw turned her gaze on the tom, relizing how serious and intense his blue gaze had become.

"You can choose your own destiny, Aspenpaw," the intensity in Driftfrost's eyes only increased. "What do you really want?"

At first Aspenpaw thought he was talking about her medicine cat position. But then she realized this was something more; something beyond healing and learning about herbs.

She never wanted to tell anyone, but the feeling that had been bottled up inside her for so long finally burst out.

"I want freedom," She whispered. "I'm tired of every cat telling what to do. My father pushed me into being a medicine cat and now..."

Driftfrost looked into the distance, nodding in what seemed to be understanding.

"Ever since that Gathering..." Aspenpaw didn't want to, but she new she had to continue. "He's all I've been thinking about. I want Jaggedswirl. But I can't have him..."

Aspenpaw wanted to sink into the ground and never come back out. She had never confided her true feelings to someone. She felt almost relieved; but something deep down inside her knew that telling Driftfrost was wrong.

"You can choose your own destiny," Driftfrost repeated, blue eyes heavy with some emotion Aspenpaw didn't recognize. "Do what is right for yourself."

Driftfrost's gray figure started to fade along with the stars twinkling around him. Aspenpaw was left to stare out over the dark moor. She lifted up her head. A star seemed to shine brighter than the rest; placed carefully in the dark sky just above where the WindClan camp would be.

Aspenpaw let her gaze drop to the star-flecked lake. *My secrets are out.* She watched the twinkling reflections. *And there is nothing I can do to change the way I feel about them.*

Chapter Fourteen

[image]

Night fell over the territories around the lake. A cold breeze stirred Aspenpaw's fur as she padded up the slope next to her ginger mentor. Leaf-bare was on its way. They followed the stream upward. Aspenpaw trailed behind the medicine cats from all the different Clans.
The Moonpool glimmered as stars reflected in the water below. The cats followed the winding path down to the water's edge. Aspenpaw started forward to touch her nose to the ice cold water, but a soft tail stopped her before she could reach it.
"Before we begin tonight's dreaming, I would like to preform a ceremony that goes back moon upon moon; to pass on wisdom for generations to come," Duskheart breathed.

Aspenpaw felt herself shiver deep inside as she started to understand what was taking place.

Duskheart stepped toward Aspenpaw, green eyes shinning. "I, Duskheart, medicine cat of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of a medicine cat, and with your help she will serve her Clan for many moons."

Something cold and sharp seem to claw Aspenpaw's insides; all of the words Duskheart spoke seemed to crumble. *Will I really serve my Clan to the best of my abilities?*

"Aspenpaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?" Duskheart continued.

The same feeling, yet more intense still, raked Aspenpaw's heart. The first few words Duskheart had said caught Aspenpaw and made her really think about what her future held. Duskheart's words rang in her head. *Do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat..?*

Aspenpaw hesitated, not meeting Duskheart's eyes. "I do," she murmured. She trembled at her own lie.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your true name as a

medicine cat. Aspenpaw, from this moment you will be known as Aspenrose. StarClan honors your speed and thoughtfulness, and we welcome you as a full medicine cat of ThunderClan." Duskheart nodded at her apprentice.
Redsplash was the first to congratulate Aspenrose, bouncing up and down in joy. "Well done, Aspenrose!"
Firepool dipped her head, and Minnowpaw nodded shyly.
Skybreeze laid his tail briefly on Aspenrose's shoulders before turning to the Moonpool.
Aspenrose waited until all the other medicine cats had settled down beside the Moonpool. She started to pad up to the water, but a thought stopped her in her tracks. Handsome copper eyes filled her mind. *How will I ever find the strength to follow my heart?*

Chapter Fifteen

[image]

Clouds clumped in the dark purple sky. A cold breeze blew, letting the clouds reveal a full silver moon. Aspenrose padded out of her den and into the camp clearing. Thornear, the deputy, stood with warriors around him. Half a moon had passed since Aspenrose's medicine cat ceremony.

Thornear gathered the cats closer with a wave of his tail. "The cats who will attend the Gathering tonight will be the medicine cats, me, and Doestar." The black tom cast his hazel gaze around the clearing.

"The warriors and apprentices who will attend the Gathering are Mistypool, Goldenfall, Junipermoon, Hollyflower, and Whitepaw," Thornear announced. "Blackheart is in charge once more while we're gone."

Doestar leaped from the Highledge, waving her tail in signal to leave. The cats who had been called trotted through the thorn tunnel after their leader.

Aspenrose looked up at the oak as Doestar found a sturdy place to sit. ShadowClan were last to arrive; Rainstar leaping into the oak to find a place as well. Aspenrose took her eyes off the leaders for a moment before the Gathering began.

She sat in a group with the other medicine cats. She studied the faces of her piers, noticing something was off. *Where is Minnowpaw?* The young white tom had been very shy, but missing a Gathering was something Aspenrose didn't expect him to do.

Aspenrose wanted to ask Firepool, Minnowpaw's mentor, but a yowl from the oak made her hesitate.

Doestar had stood first, tail twitching. "Prey is finding its way into our territory well this coming season, and Aspenrose was made a full medicine cat. Her brothers were made warriors as well: Junipermoon and Cedarroar." The brown and white leader sat down as chanting rose from the island.

"Aspenrose! Junipermoon! Cedarroar!"

As the chanting grew more faint, Rainstar stood. "Prey has been

running well in ShadowClan." the gray and white tom announced. "Swiftpaw and Ashpaw were made apprentices. And Puddlecloud and Snowheart got their warrior names. Skyfall was made a full medicine cat as well."He sat down and nodded at Waterstar.

The gray she-cat got to her paws shakily. Aspenrose noticed how frail she looked. *What life is she on?*

Waterstar's yellow eyes were heavy with exhaustion. "Sorrelfeather had become ill with greencough which turned to blackcough. She hunts with StarClan," the old leader rasped. Aspenrose guessed they must have been friends; Waterstar spoke again as whispers of farewell died down. "Fish are plentiful in RiverClan."

Aspenrose watched as Harestar stood in his turn. "We also suffer a loss in WindClan," the tabby and white tom bowed his head before continuing. "Our medicine cat apprentice, Minnowpaw, was killed by a band of rogues."

Shock pulsed through Aspenrose; and she realized she wasn't the only cat to gasp in horror.

"Firepool gave him his full name before he joined StarClan. WindClan will always thank Minnowleaf for serving his Clan to the fullest."

A moment of silence carried over the island before the leaders started to descend from the oak. Doestar waved her tail for ThunderClan to follow her. Before Aspenrose could take a step, she caught a glimpse of wonderful copper eyes in the corner of her vision. Her ear tips burned with helpless longing.

Chapter Sixteen

[image]

"Wake up, Aspenrose!" A paw jabbed into the cream she-cat's side. Aspenrose sat up immediately, shaking moss from her fur. Her ginger tabby mentor loomed over her, panic filling her green gaze. "It's Hollyflower!"

"What's wrong?" Aspenrose's grogginess faded, replaced with worry.

"She never told me... She shouldn't have done her warrior duties... I should have paid more attention!" Duskheart rambled.

"Calm down," Aspenrose laid her tail over Duskheart's shoulders. "Just tell me what's going on."

Duskheart's eyes were full of guilt. "Hollyflower is kitting." She stated. "She's too early. It should be another half-moon before she gives birth..."

Startled, Aspenrose broke away from her mentor. Babbling wouldn't help Hollyflower. She reached into the herbs cleft for supplies. Aspenrose had only ever helped deliver kits once, and they never had any complications, but now..?

Aspenrose spun around, herbs in her mouth, to see Duskheart had already left for the nursery. Aspenrose trotted quickly through the bramble screen and pushed through the nursery entrance. Duskheart sat over Hollyflower, stroking her belly with her orange tail. Littlefrost had left her two kits to comfort Hollyflower. Aspenrose found a place to sit next to her mentor and dropped the herbs nearby.

One kit had already been born before Aspenrose had entered the nursery, but she could tell another one was coming. Hollyflower let out a yowl of pain as another kit came. Her breathing started to steady and returned to normal. She sat up and nosed her kits to her belly.

Littlefrost helped Hollyflower clean her two kits. "Two she-kits," Duskheart sat back, beginning to relax. "And no complications."

Hollyflower sat up just as Tawnyleaf burst through the entrance. The brown tabby tom's green eyes were shaded with

worry, but replaced with relief as he looked over his mate and kits.

Tawnyleaf padded over and licked Hollyflower's ear. "What shall we call them?"

Hollyflower bent her head down to touch the dark brown tabby she-kit, "She takes after her father. We'll call her Elmkit."

Tawnyleaf purred. He then reached down to lick the black she-kit. "She looks a lot like you, doesn't she. How about Willowkit?"
Hollyflower rested her head on Tawnyleaf's side. "Lovely."
Aspenrose's insides tightened.

Chapter Seventeen

[image]

An overcast sky loomed over the lake, shadowing the forest and moor. A rise over looked a stream that trickled into the lake. A hard cold wind rustled the heather and the treetops; leafless branches billowing as they dipped and swayed in the air. Leaf-bare had reached the Clans.
A cream-and-white she-cat sat on the rise with her dark-cream tabby tail curled over her paws; her ice-blue gaze flickered over the moor, hiding any feelings behind an unreadable mask. Paw steps crunches the dead leaves nearby.
A group of cats padded up the incline, reaching the cream she-cat. Two of the four cats seemed to have similar features as the cream she-cat; the dark brown tabby tom was lithe as she was, and the other tabby and white tom almost shared the same color eyes as she did, yet his were a deeper darker blue that expressed his emotions. The large gray tom's amber eyes glittered with hatred, and his white litter-mate trailed closely behind, green eyes cast down, striped tail twitching.
Aspenrose merely glanced up to meet each cat's gaze in turn, before overviewing the stream again. Graypaw's tail twitched impatiently. Junipermoon's blue-green gaze shone with apprehension. Cedarroar rippled his shoulder muscles impatiently. Birchpaw shuffled her paws.
A long silence lasted between the Clan-mates before another hard wind buffeted their fur. Aspenrose met the gaze of Graypaw.
He opened his mouth to speak, but Aspenrose started before he could get any words out. "Am I invisible? Why am I ignored? Why can't any cat see that I'm *hurting*?"
Graypaw's eyes flickered with what seemed to be guilt, then pity.
Aspenrose let her gaze drop. "None of you can answer, can you? You would never understand. So I have to make my own decisions," Aspenrose gave one last sorrowful glance at her brothers and Graypaw.
Aspenrose turned and bounded down the rise toward the stream. Wind whipped her whiskers and made her eyes stream.

"Aspenrose?" The wind blew one of the cats's calls down to her, but she pushed on.
Aspenrose leaped the WindClan border, but misjudged the jump, landing in the cold water. She scrambled out to the other side, not taking a second to look back. Her heart ached as she bounded over the moor.
She knew exactly where her paws would take her, and she didn't try to stop them. Aspenrose was not running away from something, but running *to* something that had made her empty inside for moons. The heather seemed to whisper his name in the wind. *Jaggedswirl.*
The WindClan camp came into view. Aspenrose's paws barely touched the ground as she ran to her long awaited loss. Her heart fluttered.

Aspenrose panted, gasping for breath. She padded over the crest of the WindClan camp, eyes searching the clearing. A gray tabby and white she-cat was guarding the camp, and trotted over to her.
"Hey what are you doing in — oh you're a medicine cat, aren't you?" The gray tabby halted, dipping her head. "I'm Addertuft. Do you need to see Firepool?"
Aspenrose caught her breath, but nodded. Addertuft waved her tail. "Follow me."
Another cat was approaching, black and white pelt shadowed from the clouds. Aspenrose felt her ears grow hot. Addertuft whispered something to Jaggedswirl. He nodded, and turned toward Aspenrose.
"Greetings. Welcome to WindClan," Jaggedswirl dipped his head, copper eyes sparkling.
Aspenrose only nodded in thanks. He padded away, leaving Addertuft to lead Aspenrose to Firepool's den. Her heart skipped a beat, feelings swirling like a raging storm inside her.

•PART TWO•

~Aspenrose tries to find her place among WindClan. Follow the rest of her journey as she finds her true meaning of life...~

Allegiances {Part Two}

ThunderClan

Leader: Doestar- light brown and white she-cat (Apprentice: Birchpaw)

Deputy: Thornear- black tom with hazel eyes and a torn ear (Apprentice: Whitepaw)

Medicine Cat: Duskheart- ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Warriors:

Mistypool- light gray she-cat with dark gray tabby stripes and amber eyes

Goldenfall- long-furred golden-brown she-cat with white chest and green eyes

Blackheart- black and white tom with green eyes (Apprentice; Graypaw)

Sparkspots- tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Jaywatcher- black tom with blue eyes

Kinkclaw- brown and ginger tabby she-cat with white chest and face (Apprentice: Deerpaw)

Robincloud- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes

Tawnyleaf- brown tabby tom with green eyes

Junipermoon- dark brown tabby and white tom with greenish-blue eyes

Cedarroar- brown tabby and white tom with deep blue eyes

Apprentices:

Birchpaw- white she-cat with green eyes and gray tabby stripes on tail

Graypaw- gray tom with amber eyes

Whitepaw- white tom with ginger tabby patches and green eyes

Deerpaw- brown she-cat wit white ear tips and paws

Queens:

Littlefrost- gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes, Thornear is the father of her kits: Cinderkit (black and white tom) And Echokit (gray tom)

Hollyflower- black she-cat with hazel eyes, Tawnyleaf is the father of her kits: Elmkit (dark brown tabby she-kit) And Willowkit (black she-kit)

ShadowClan

Leader: Rainstar- gray and white tom

Deputy: Squirrelpelt- cream tom (Apprentice; Skyfall)

Medicine Cat: Redsplash- white she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors:

Tallfur- gray tom

Blizzardflame- brown tabby she-cat with white flecks (Apprentice: Ashpaw)

Kestrelfoot- brown she-cat with white paws

Tigergaze- ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Cherryfur- russet tabby tom (Apprentice; Oakpaw)

Dovemist- cream she-cat with green eyes

Darkmoon- very dark gray tom with amber eyes and a white marking on chest and white one forepaw (Apprentice: Swiftpaw)

Puddlecloud- white tom with blue eyes

Snowheart- white tom with green eyes

Elders:

Harespots- tortoiseshell and light brown she-cat with amber eyes

Crowheart- black she-cat with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader: Harestar- white tom with brown tabby patches

Deputy: Fawntail- black and white she-cat with ginger-tipped tail (Apprentice; Amberpaw)

Medicine Cat: Firepool- ginger she-cat (Apprentice: Aspenrose)

Warriors:

Sandheart- black tom with yellow eyes

Duskspots- white she-cat with tortoiseshell patches and amber eyes (Apprentice; Brackenpaw)

Crookedwing- ginger she-cat

Dapplesplash- white she-cat with orange spots (Apprentice; Olivepaw)

Crystalflame- russet tabby she-cat with green eyes (Apprentice; Mallowpaw)

Frozenheart- gray tabby she-cat

Silverleaf- white she-cat with green eyes

Addertuft- gray tabby she-cat with hazel eyes and white chest, face, paws, and tail-tip

Snowleap- white she-cat with amber eyes

Jaggedswirl- black and white tom with copper eyes

Elders:

Heathermoon- Siamese she-cat with icee blue eyes

RiverClan

Leader: Waterstar- gray she-cat with dark gray flecks and yellow eyes

Deputy: Ryefeather- ginger tom with silvery-blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Skybreeze- gray tom with sky-blue eyes

Warriors:

Lilyfoot- black she-cat with four white paws and blueish-lilac eyes

Seaear- light gray tom with white ear tips (Apprentice; Mosspaw)

Dovefoot- gray tom with white paws (Apprentice; Lightpaw)

Irisstream- white she-cat with reddish-lilac eyes

Robinheart- russet tabby tom with white chest

Sedgedawn- gray tom with amber eyes

Echomist- blue-gray tabby she-cat (Apprentice; Cherrypaw)

Redshade- black tom with amber eyes

Chapter Eighteen

[image]

Brilliant shades of blue and purple mixed together to make a wonderful star-filled night sky. The half moon shinned as clouds ominously crept over it, shadowing the lake below. The black water lapped at the sandy shore, pebbles lining the bank.

Heather swayed carelessly in the humid new-leaf breeze. Deep in the heart of WindClan territory, two cats prepared to leave for a journey to speak with their ancestors.

A dark ginger she-cat padded out of a rock crevice; a cream she-cat followed, tabby tail twitching slightly, ice-blue eyes empty: lost of feelings.

The cat on guard looked up as the medicine cats passed. Most of his figure was hidden as shadows were cast over his black pelt, but his white features shone and his copper eyes sparkled in the slight moonlight. He nodded as they left the camp.

The cream she-cat did not respond, only ducked her head away, receiving suspicious glances from her ginger mentor. The cream she-cat gave one last glance at the silhouette of the handsome tom before trotting hastily after her mentor.

The star-flecked surface of the Moonpool shone up ahead. Aspenrose followed Firepool down the spiral path where the other medicine cats awaited their presence. Aspenrose caught sight of a light ginger tabby she-cat, and her belly lurched.

This was her first time going to the Moonpool since her arrival at WindClan, and she had no intention of telling the others why she left, let alone even talking to her former mentor.

As Aspenrose reached the edge of the pool, every cat looked up in surprise and suspicion. Duskheart dipped her head respectfully as she passed, but her green eyes were glazed with regret and pain. Skybreeze nodded, but didn't say a word, his calm gaze questioning.

Redsplash was the only one to welcome the WindClan cats. "Hello Firepool, Aspenrose." Her smile was welcoming and her tone edged with excitement, but her reddish-amber gaze slightly flickered when Aspenrose passed and nodded her head awkwardly.

Embarrassment rushed through her as she settled down next to Firepool. She touched her nose to the wonderful water, letting the gentle rippling water lull her into her dreams.

•*•*•*•

Unfamiliar forest stretched out before Aspenrose; aspen trees were scattered throughout, nothing like ThunderClan territory. Yellow leaves dotted the treetops, creating a wonderful forest of sunset-looking hues.

A path winded in front of Aspenrose, worn down by countless animals passing through. *But this is a dream. What would make a path here?*

Aspenrose drowned out her senses and logic and followed the path through the beautiful forest. She came to a stream that trickled in her path, too wide to cross without swimming. The path didn't continue on the other side of the stream.

Aspenrose sat down and peered into the clear water, catching a glimpse of her reflection. Ice-blue eyes stared back at her, emotionless. Something copper flashed for a heartbeat where her icee stare had been, but when she looked closer only her own features reflect in the sparkling water.

Something in the corner of Aspenrose's eye caught her attention, and she turned to see a familiar long-furred gray tom sitting beside her. Stars faintly flecked his fur; he met her gaze.

Aspenrose didn't say anything, waiting for a warning, a sign, anything to take her mind off of her desire for Jaggedswirl to notice her. But Driftfrost said nothing.

Aspenrose turned her gaze to the aspen-filled forest beyond the stream, keeping her voice steady. "What is it like, Driftfrost, in StarClan?"

After a few moments without an answer, Aspenrose turned her gaze back to the gray tom. His expression showed with amusement. "You'll find you one day, I'm sure, but for now, keep your head out of the clouds and focus on what matters most."

Aspenrose's heart ached. *What matters most.* Aspenrose peered into the stream again, thinking of the time when she was a kit. Her worries never existed then, in a time of play and a carefree life. *Now it's different. Now I'm different.*

"Only you can decide what is right for you, Aspenrose." Driftfrost reached a starry paw down and delicately touched the water.

Before Aspenrose could realize what was taking place, the stream

began to speed up. It kept getting faster until it was a foamy blur. The water started to rise, reaching Aspenrose's paws. She backed up, looking at Driftfrost for help, but he only looked at her calmly. "*If the wind blows and a Swirling storm shall cover the Moon, seek answers where your heart truly lies*." Driftfrost's pelt started to shimmer with bright starlight.

It shone so brightly Aspenrose had to close her eyes, but when she opened them again, her nose was touching the Moonpool. Before Aspenrose could make a move, a single yellow aspen leaf fell from above, landing on the surface of the pool of wonders.

Chapter Nineteen

[image]

Red dawn light shone from overhead. The sky was a wonderful canvas of many warm hues. Aspenrose padded out of the rock crevice that was her den, and padded over to the fresh-kill pile. New-leaf had brought a clouded sky and a light drizzle that morning.
Aspenrose reached down and grabbed a blackbird for her mentor and a mouse for herself. She padded back to her den and caught a glimpse of a white tom with tabby patches. Aspenrose turned her head to see Harestar's gaze resting on her, before her quickly looked away and padded up to his deputy, Fawntail.
Aspenrose inwardly sighed before returning to her den. She placed the blackbird at Firepool's paws before returning to sorting the rest of the herbs she had laid out. Firepool nodded gratefully, stopping her work to eat.
Between a mouthful, she glanced up at Aspenrose. "Why don't you take a break," Aspenrose perked her ears but kept focused on her job. "You've been sorting herbs since you woke up. I can take it from here."
Aspenrose gave a grateful glance at her dark ginger mentor before grabbing her mouse in her jaws and trotting our of the den.
She searched the camp clearing for a place to eat her prey. Harestar and Fawntail were sitting together, most likely planning the hunting patrols. Sandheart and Crookedwing were sharing tongues, and Silverleaf and Crystalflame sat in deep conversation with Heathermoon.
Every other cat must have been out on dawn patrol or hunting. Aspenrose padded over to a spot by herself, but before she could sit down, a gray tabby and white she-cat padded up to her.
"Wanna join me?" Addertuft stood over her with a vole dangling in her jaws. "I'm headed to the rise above the camp," she pointed with her tail.
Aspenrose shrugged her shoulders. "Sure."
She never had been treated like this before, and she didn't know how to act or respond, but she followed Addertuft anyways.

"Really?" Aspenrose laughed at Addertuft's story.
Addertuft's hazel eyes sparkled. "Yes! And then my mentor started laughing, not even trying to help me get out!" Addertuft smiled. "It was leaf-bare too, so the water was so cold. I went back to camp shivering and drenched. My fellow apprentices almost made me sleep outside!"
Aspenrose smiled as Addertuft ended her story, looking out at the purple heather before her.
Her smile faded as she became serious again. "It's much more beautiful here than in the forest," she didn't take her eyes off the moor as she spoke. "There's no trees blocking out the sunsets. And no undergrowth to trip you. The open air feels great in your fur..."
Aspenrose let her voice trail off to look up at Addertuft. She gazed back down at her. "It's good to have someone to talk to," Addertuft smiled. "It's good to have a friend."
Aspenrose was taken aback. *A friend?* She had never had a *real* friend before. She liked it. Being alone was nice sometimes, but Aspenrose wanted someone to look out for, someone to look out for her.
Addertuft's gaze sparkled with amusement. "C'mon, I'll race you to the lake shore!"
Aspenrose bounded after Addertuft, letting the wind carry her forwards. Her paws were light upon the ground, and her strides came quick. She felt like she could fly, and all her worries and doubts left her as she sped beside Addertuft: her friend.

Chapter Twenty

[image]

Dusk started to settle over the lake and surrounding territories. Pinkish clouds drifted lazily overhead. Deep in the heart of the moor lied the WindClan camp.
"Have you had any dreams from StarClan lately?" Aspenrose looked up at her dark ginger mentor.
"No," Aspenrose let her ears flick back at her own lie.
"I haven't either," Firepool sighed. "Not even at the Moonpool. StarClan is silent; *too* silent."
Aspenrose nodded in agreement, shame burning in her chest. The words Driftfrost had spoken came back to her like a whisper in the breeze. *If the wind blows and a Swirling storm shall cover the Moon, seek answers where your heart truly lies.*
What does it mean? Aspenrose glanced up at Firepool. *If I tell her she could help me figure it out...* Aspenrose shook her head slightly to herself. She was worried it had something to do with Jaggedswirl, but she couldn't figure out what it meant.
"I need some air," Aspenrose commented. Without waiting for a reply, she trotted out of the rock cleft and into the camp clearing. Dusk was approaching, the sky turning a light shade of purples and pinks.
Aspenrose searched the camp with an icee gaze. She found the cat she was looking for next to the fresh-kill pile. Before Aspenrose could make a move toward her friend, she noticed that Addertuft had her hazel eyes fixed intensely on something in the distance. Aspenrose followed Addertuft's gaze to the returning evening patrol. Harestar led the patrol with Duskspots and her apprentice, Brackenpaw. Crystalflame and Mallowpaw followed, with one more unmistakable cat bringing up the rear.
As the patrol broke apart, Addertuft's gaze followed one cat in particular. Aspenrose's insides twisted and rolled like a raging storm.
Her friend's stare had been set on Aspenrose's one longing, Jaggedswirl. And as he approached the fresh-kill pile, his deep copper eyes met her's and sparkled.

Chapter Twenty-One

[image]

Aspenrose sat outside the medicine cat den, Firepool by her side. They had just finished sorting through the herb store, and sun-high had approached. Huge fluffy white clouds scattered the sky in clumps. All was calm.
Footsteps pounded towards the camp. Aspenrose perked her ears in curiosity. A gray tabby she-cat bounded over the slope, flanks heaving. She approached the medicine cats, out of breath.
"Come quick," Frozenheart panted. "Addertuft is hurt!"
Firepool stood immediately. "Frozenheart take Aspenrose to her. Hurry! I'll catch up with the herbs."
Aspenrose sprang to her paws, her mind whirling. *Not Addertuft! I hope she's okay!* Addertuft, Aspenrose's only friend, was hurt. Anxiety pulsed through her veins. She bounded off after Frozenheart.
The gray tabby she-cat led Aspenrose down a small rise and toward the horse-place. Aspenrose felt speed pick up under her paws, bracing for the worst.
They came to a stop near a clump of bushes just before the horse-place. Frozenheart lingered back, as if afraid of the outcome.
A white she-cat sat nearby. "She was chasing a rabbit when she twisted her paw in a rabbit hole. She can't stand," Snowleap explained, amber eyes flicking to another cat.
Jaggedswirl sat close to Addertuft, licking her ears to comfort her. Aspenrose examined her friend's twisted paw. She sighed in relief. *Only a sprain.*
She looked up to see Snowleap stroking her brother's pelt with her tail. Jaggedswirl looked up to meet Aspenrose's gaze. Worry showed slightly in his beautiful copper eyes.
"It's only a sprain," Aspenrose mewed softly. "She'll be fine."
Aspenrose noticed relief flow over Jaggedswirl's expression. A moment later, Firepool arrived with the essentials.
Aspenrose picked out a poppy seed from the bundle as Firepool applied nettle leaves to Addertuft's paw. Addertuft lapped up the seed slowly.

"Thank you, Firepool," Addertuft raised her head. "That feels *much* better."
"Let's get her back to camp," Firepool ordered. "Snowleap take one side and Frozenheart take the other. Jaggedswirl take the lead and Aspenrose follow from behind in case she stumbles. I'll meet you back at camp, I need to get her nest ready before she arrives."
Frozenheart And Snowleap helped Addertuft slowly to her paws. As they did so, Jaggedswirl's gaze met Aspenrose's again. He dipped his head in gratitude. Aspenrose felt her ear tips get hot, and nodded in response.
Aspenrose took her position in the back. But before they set off, Aspenrose caught Jaggedswirl nuzzle Addertuft, and she licked his ear back. Aspenrose felt as if her ribcage had just been crushed. The affection between her best friend and her crush was only growing stronger, and it wasn't hard to miss. Suddenly a moment in time came back to Aspenrose, and the heather seemed to whisper to her in the breeze. *If the Wind blows and a Swirling storm shall cover the Moon, seek answers where your heart truly lies*

Aspenrose felt lightheaded. She realized what part of it meant now, and she did not like it. *Jaggedswirl is the Swirling storm.* Aspenrose caught her breath. Bottled up feelings returned, and she vowed to keep them hidden behind her mask, for good.

Chapter Twenty-Two

[image]

An overcast sky loomed over the lake, dark gray clouds growling with thunder and flashing with lightning. Aspenrose padded beside, Firepool, her mentor, carrying a bundle of catmint in her jaws. Silverleaf padded along with them, her white pelt standing out on the dreary day.

She stopped and raised her tail in a signal for the others to do the same. She crouched down and stalked forwards, angling her ears toward a mouse scuttling in the tall grass.

She stalked closer, and as the mouse raised its head in alarm, Silverleaf pounced, catching it with one paw. She smiled in satisfaction, raising her prey in her jaws proudly.

"Nice catch," Aspenrose commented.

"Thanks!" Silverleaf's green eyes sparkled.

Rain splattered the cats's fur as they padded in the direction of camp. Aspenrose gazed up at the dark sky. A rain drop dripped onto her nose, and fell when she returned her gaze ahead.

Aspenrose followed Silverleaf absently, and turned her attention to the distant moorland hills beyond their territory. The grass was more yellowish there, and there wasn't much heather. Aspenrose wondered what lay beyond the lake territories, what adventure awaited, but she had found her home here and that's where she wanted to stay.

Aspenrose just about walked into Silverleaf before stopping clumsily, barely brushing the she-cat's pelt. Her white fur was bristled, and she had dropped her mouse from the previous hunt. Her ears were angled; green ears sharp and searching. Silverleaf went ridged.

Aspenrose heard it too, and caught Firepool bristled her dark fur beside her. The noise was distant, but it was clear and gradually getting closer.

"Dog!" Silverleaf yowled. "Run! Get help!"

The WindClan cats didn't have much time to react before the black and white dog was upon them. Aspenrose dropped her bundle of herbs but hesitated.

She caught a glimpse of Silverleaf, who nodded for her to go, before she was in the jaws of the beast. Aspenrose let out a gasp of horror. Firepool leaped on top of the dog, but that was the last Aspenrose had seen, for she had taken flight.
The cream she-cat bounded away from the scene to where she knew the camp was. Her paws seemed like they would lift off the ground, but the heaviness inside her chest kept her grounded. Her blood pounded in her ears, but still she ran harder.
The crest of the rise was just ahead, and as she reached it she looked out over her camp. Cats were taking shelter from the now picking up rain.
"Help!" Aspenrose stumbled down the muddy slope, mud splattering her pelt.
Cats's head poked out from behind bushes that lined the shallow dip. She motion to the closest cats, which came over, alarm sparkling in their gazes and curiosity ruffling their fur. She recognized Fawntail, the black and white deputy, and Frozenheart, Silverleaf's gray tabby sister.
"Follow me," Aspenrose didn't wait for a reply, but bounded back in the direction of the faint yapping.
They bounded up and down slopes, almost blindly through the thickening rain and slippery mud. The yapping grew louder as they approached.
Aspenrose braced herself before they came over the rise; but she slowed her pace and let the warriors pass her, now aware of the problem. She found her paws grow numb at the scene bellow her. Fawntail and Frozenheart chased the dog away; but Firepool, ears battered and flank stained crimson, crouched over the unmoving, unmistakable, yet delicate white body. It looked as if she was asleep, or at least at peace. Frozenheart's piercing cry was sharp and unforgettable. Silverleaf's brave green eyes flashed in Aspenrose's memory, fading like her existence.

Chapter Twenty-Three

[image]

The red blazing sky was striped with small trails and wisps of clouds. New-leaf was coming to an end. The grass was tall and green and lush. The heather was at its fullest, and the air was still and silent. It was as if StarClan knew that there had been mourning in the heart of WindClan.

Aspenrose stood in the middle of her den with Firepool beside her. Her ginger mentor had taken a nasty bite to the hind leg, and was set to bed rest for the next couple days. Fawntail had a bite on her shoulder and stood before Aspenrose now, awaiting her treatment.

Aspenrose fumbled through the herbs store, picking out some marigold petals. She delicately chewed them up, then turning to her deputy after, applied it to her wound. There wasn't much bleeding, so Aspenrose decided against putting cobwebs over the bite.
"There you go, Fawntail," Aspenrose sighed inwardly. "Remember to take it easy today, and then by tomorrow you should be able to return to normal duties."
Fawntail nodded curtly, "Thanks." She turned and left the den through the cleft, ginger-tipped tail swishing as she went.
Frozenheart squeezed through next, amber eyes glazed over with grief for her sister. Aspenrose felt sympathy tug at her heart, but couldn't find the words to explain it to her Clanmate.
Frozenheart had only a minor cut to her ear, which Aspenrose stopped the bleeding by placing cobwebs on it. After the blood flow stopped, Aspenrose plastered a small amount of what was left of the marigold on Frozenheart's ear.
Once done, Aspenrose only flicked her tail in acknowledgment of so. Frozenheart kept her sorrowful gaze to the ground, but retreated slowly out of the den without saying a word.
When Aspenrose stepped out of her den, lavender bundled in her jaws, what lay before her made her insides twist. Silverleaf lay in the center of the camp, green eyes shut as if she was asleep. Frozenheart crouched over her, nose buried in her sister's white fur. The rest of the cats stayed more at a distance, separated in groups,

mostly sitting with their families. Addertuft sat with Crystalflame, her russet tabby mother, and Harestar, her father.
Jaggedswirl and Snowleap sat together with their pretty tortoiseshell-patched mother, Duskspots, and their black-furred father, Sandheart.
Crookedwing and Dapplesplash sat together, the two similar sisters looking at Silverleaf sadly. Fawntail sat just outside the elder den with Heathermoon, her mother.
Aspenrose proceeded after she took the scene in. She padded up to Silverleaf's delicate body, dropping the lavender gently beside her before turning her gaze to the grief-stricken tabby, who was unrecognizable under the veil of sorrow she wore.

Chapter Twenty-Four

[image]

Stars specked the clear deep blue sky. A warm green-leaf breeze stirred the long grass. The lake's reflection consisted of different shades of beautiful dark blues, and reflected blazing stars. Pebbles lined the shore, and the water lapped lazily at the edges.

Aspenrose looked out over the lake. She lay with her paws tucked underneath her and her tail wrapped around her. She glanced down at her reflection, and thought she caught sight of white fur. She turned her head, but no one was beside her. Another warm breeze stirred her fur, but brought a slight whisper with it.

"Everything happens for a reason," the familiar voice seemed to say.

Aspenrose let herself ponder on the idea. Was Silverleaf talking about her death? Did she mean to say it was her time to join StarClan? Surely she was hinting at something more; although Aspenrose mourned her Clanmate's loss, she had never questioned why StarClan had taken Silverleaf.

Something shifted inside Aspenrose's thoughts, something dark and cold and distant, and it pierced her heart. *She isn't speaking of her own death.* Pain leaped through Aspenrose silently and quickly, as if the wind had penetrated her soul. *She's talking about my prophecy.*

•*•*•*•*•

The sun was rising in the distance, creating a canvas of colors. No clouds blocked out the wonderful sight. The day was clear, warm, and calm. Aspenrose hid herself in the tall grass, waiting for her time.

She peered through the blades to catch a glimpse of her tabby and white friend. Addertuft was stalking something, crouching, and waiting for the right moment to strike.

She strode forward, long legs carrying her quickly after the rabbit. Aspenrose waited. Addertuft was almost a tail-length away from the rabbit by the time she reached Aspenrose's hiding spot.

Addertuft slowed slightly, and veered to the side so that the rabbit headed straight toward Aspenrose. Aspenrose sprang out of the

grass, landing blindly and tumbling down a nearby slope.
Aspenrose came to a sprawling stop, tangled in her own legs and tail. The rabbit shot past her daringly, as if willing her to chase it.
"Get it, mouse-brain!" Addertuft's call was full of amusement and laughter from the top of the slope.
Aspenrose scrambled to her paws, rushing after the cheeky rabbit. Addertuft caught up to her. They were both almost on top of the rabbit. Addertuft sprang forward, but the rabbit dove sideways and dashed away.
Addertuft landed in a clump of tall grass, and Aspenrose came to a rolling halt, landing in the grass beside her friend. They took one look at each other before Addertuft burst out in laughter.
"Clumsy furball!" Addertuft gave Aspenrose a playful prod.
Her hazel eyes were full of tears from the overwhelming laughter.
Aspenrose smiled.
•*•*•*•*•*•
It was mid-day. The sun blazed overhead, the cloudless sky a shade of light blue. Aspenrose lay outside the rock cleft, in the shade of the rise above. Addertuft padded into the camp with Jaggedswirl. The handsome tom was smiling, black tail intertwined with Addertuft's.
"Can we have everybody's attention?" Jaggedswirl stood facing the slowly gathering cats around him. Aspenrose didn't move, afraid of what lay ahead.
"Addertuft and I have been friends for a while and...," his wonderful copper eyes met Aspenrose's best friend's hazel eyes. "It's pretty exciting, well — we've decided to become mates!"
Meows of congratulation erupted around the camp. Duskspots brimmed with pride for her son, and Harestar went to congratulate him and his daughter.
Aspenrose felt distant; the voices faded and all she could see was darkness: all she could hear was her own heart pounding inside her chest. Copper eyes filled her mind, and when she opened her eyes, reality hit her.
It was real. This was real. They were real, together. Aspenrose could feel her heart crumble, and her feelings melt inside her; but she put on a fake smile and forced her eyes to be warm and inviting, and she went to congratulate her friend.

Chapter Twenty-Five

[image]

The dark orange sun dipped low behind the clouds, hidden by the horizon. Dark blue etched the sky, and a full silver moon peeked out from behind a cloud. A white tom with brown tabby patches stepped into the middle of the camp, moonlight dappling his fur. "The cats who shall attend the Gathering will be me, Fawntail, Amberpaw, Frozenheart, Snowleap, and Sandheart. Heathermoon And Firepool also, of course," Harestar announced to the gathered cats around him of WindClan.

Aspenrose turned to pad toward her den. Since she had arrived at WindClan, one season had passed. She hadn't gone to the previous Gatherings because, she believed, that Harestar didn't want to explain to the other Clans about her movement from ThunderClan to his Clan.

Before Aspenrose could make it to the rock cleft, Fawntail was beside her. The black and white deputy placed her ginger-tipped tail upon Aspenrose's shoulders, and turned the cream she-cat to face her.

"You'll be coming too, Aspenrose," Fawntail mewed politely. "You're WindClan's medicine cat apprentice, after all."

Aspenrose felt joy surge through her, and she gave a thankful smile to her deputy. *This is my home.* Aspenrose looked around at her Clanmates, gazing at them each in turn. *It always has been.*

•*•*•*•*•*•*•

Aspenrose halted abruptly, nearly running into nearby Sandheart. There was a slight hold up at the tree-bridge. RiverClan had just crossed and now ShadowClan were proceeding before WindClan. There was the slightest breeze in the air that warmed the cats's fur on this special night.

The sky was a wonderful shade of bright blue, but fluffy clouds blotted out most of the stars, and the moon was barely visible behind its shield of clouds. WindClan's turn finally came to cross. ThunderClan had finally arrived, and waited patiently for their turn.

Aspenrose was the last WindClan cat to cross, and the water

below was dark blue and ripples appeared across the surface. Aspenrose proceeded carefully across the tree, but her paw-hold slipped and she felt herself sliding over the edge. Some cat put their shoulder to her's just at the right moment, preventing her from tumbling into the blue depths below.

Aspenrose made her way across to jump down awkwardly into the sand of the island. She turned to see who had helped her, and felt her chest grow tight. A familiar black and ginger tabby stood before her, amber eyes full of warmth and longing for her kit.

Soon Cedarroar and Junipermoon had joined Kinkclaw, facing their sibling with mixed emotions. Cedarroar's deep blue eyes were heavy with regret, and he didn't meet her gaze. Junipermoon flexed his claws, and he looked nervous, almost uncomfortable. Kinkclaw's gaze was full of pain. She dismissed her other sons with a wave of her tail.

Cedarroar and Junipermoon padded by, without a word to Aspenrose.

"How are things in WindClan?" Kinkclaw asked curiously.
I followed my heart, like you told me, she wanted to say. But she remembered her promise to herself. "Fine. Everything's fine."

When Aspenrose turned away from her mother she felt herself tremble inside. She met the gaze of another familiar cat and tried to avoid her, but she waved her black-striped tail invitingly.

The white she-cat's green gaze glowed in excitement. "Hello, Aspenrose," Birchpaw mewed.

"Hi, Birchpaw," Aspenrose replied. She felt herself grow increasingly uncomfortable as the cat beside Birchpaw went rigged. The gray tom had grown a lot since the last time Aspenrose had seen him.

She met his gaze. Aspenrose felt surprise wash over her; his amber were heavy with sorrow and guilt.
She was snapped back into reality when Birchpaw pipped up. "Actually, we're warriors now," she stated proudly. "Birchripple and Graypond."

Aspenrose dipped her head respectfully. Before she could turn to leave, Graypond nudged Birchripple away. Reluctantly, Birchripple retreated.

Graypond met Aspenrose's gaze. "Aspenrose," he begin.
Aspenrose felt as if she was in that memory again.

It was night. She followed the warrior and his apprentice. He raised a paw, claw's catching the glint from the silver moon.

Aspenrose could almost feel the pain in her shoulder where her scar was hidden beneath her soft fur. She turned away before her could finish, overwhelmed with feelings. She thought she caught his words in her ear. "I'm sorry."

But she mostly wasn't paying attention to him anymore. A black pelt caught her gaze; his bright blue eyes piercing her fur, full of disappointment. Her father turned his back on her.

Chapter Twenty-Six

[image]

There wasn't a cloud in the clear baby blue sky. The wind rustled the heather and made reeds dance lazily near the lake shore. The breeze formed ripples over the surface of the lake; they met the pebbles feebly at the shore, lapping at the edge.
It was scorching hot; it was noon and the middle of green-leaf. A cream she-cat picked her way down the the shore, carefully following the tabby ahead.
Aspenrose bounded to catch up with Addertuft. She padded alongside her friend, weaving through tall swaying grass as the ground leveled out.

The two she-cats pushed through the reeds into the open. Pebbles lined the shore, clanking together as the cats followed the edge of the water.

Addertuft turned to look at the cream she-cat. "So what herb are you looking for exactly?" She asked, hazel eyes searching the shore.

Aspenrose pointed with her tail to a clump of abundantly growing leaves by the water's edge. "Watermint, for Heathermoon's bellyache," Aspenrose explained.
Once they reached the green plant, the she-cats started plucking them from the stems gently. Aspenrose picked up her bundle, padding beside Addertuft to head back to camp.
"Did you hear? Olivepaw and Mallowpaw are doing their final assessments today," Addertuft mumbled through her mouthful of watermint.
Aspenrose nodded in response. *About time.* WindClan had needed the extra warriors, ever since Silverleaf had joined StarClan.
"Too bad Minnowleaf isn't here to watch his siblings," Addertuft added. "But I'm sure he's watching in StarClan."
Aspenrose could only bring herself to flick her tail. Minnowleaf had been WindClan's previous medicine cat apprentice before he was attacked and killed by rogues. Guilt tightened in her chest. *I'm taking his place now... And I'm not even WindClan-born.*
Aspenrose let her eyes drift to Addertuft. *I may not have WindClan*

blood, but WindClan will always be home. She smiled to herself.
••*•*•*•*•*
"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join me in the clearing," Harestar's yowl sounded around the clearing. Stars flecked the night sky.
Aspenrose found a place to sit next to Addertuft and Crystalflame, Addertuft's mother. Their leader stood on the crest above the camp, his white fur blazing in the moonlight, tabby patches dappling his pelt.

"It is about time WindClan received some new warriors," Harestar announced.

Aspenrose spotted the excited apprentices near the front of the crowd of cats. Olivepaw sat up tall with her ears pricked and amber gaze soft with worry. Her black tabby pelt was barely visible in the night. Mallowpaw puffed out his chest, green eyes sparking with confidence, brown tabby pelt neatly groomed for the occasion.

"Olivepaw, please come forwards," Olivepaw padded up the rise hesitantly, gaze flickering with anticipation.
"I, Harestar, leader of WindClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn," Harestar spoke the ancient words passed on moon upon moon until now.
"Olivepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"
"I do," Olivepaw mewed gently.
Harestar nodded. "Then the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Olivepaw, from this moment on you will be know as Oliveclaw. StarClan honors your strength and fighting skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan."
Harestar touched his nose to the newly made warrior's head, and she bounded gracefully down the crest to join her Clan.
Harestar preformed the same ceremony to Mallowpaw.
"Mallowpaw, from this moment on you will be know as Mallowfall. StarClan honors your independence and your skill in battle."

"Oliveclaw! Mallowfall!" The Clan cheered out. As they broke away, Aspenrose took in her thoughts. WindClan had received two new warriors who would serve their Clan honorably. Aspenrose stopped herself. She looked around at her Clanmates. *I'm home.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

[image]

Stars dotted the clouded purple-blue sky. The bright silver moon shone through clouds, uncovered. Aspenrose slipped out of her rock cleft den, padding silently to the edge of the clearing. She padded out of the shallow scoop of the camp, staying at the edge.
Aspenrose gazed up at the wonderful night sky, sighing softly to herself. The peace was wonderful, the loneliness comforting. She had been spending a lot of time either in the medicine cat den with Firepool, or hanging out with Addertuft. It was seldom she got time to herself. Even though Addertuft was her best and only friend, she liked the solitary quiet.
The only time her and Addertuft weren't together was either when Aspenrose was training with Firepool, or when Addertuft was on warrior duties; and when Addertuft was off with Jaggedswirl. The thought pained her, but she had to be strong for her friend.
She pondered for a moment. *I* could *choose love over loyalty if I truly wanted.* She remembered the few times Driftfrost had visited her. *You can choose your own destiny,* he had said. *Only you can decide what's right for you.* She shook herself. The memories of Addertuft came back, laughing with her and chasing her across the moor. It almost made her smile. *I'll choose loyalty over love any day.*
Then she remembered the prophecy. She still hadn't figured out what it truly meant, and she was starting to doubt whether it was really a prophecy at all. Something flickered at the edge of Aspenrose's vision, stealing her away from her thoughts.
Cats dotted the clearing, flanks rising and falling in sleep. Most warriors and apprentices and even the leader and deputy slept under the stars. WindClan camp didn't have many dens. The medicine cats shared a den tucked away in a rock cleft. The elders slept in an old badger den, and previous queens would sleep under a gorse bush.
Aspenrose almost turned away before her gaze drifted to a moving shadow at the other side of the camp. *Two* shadows. Two cats were picking their way out of camp. The moon shone brightly, and set the two cats' fur alight.

One had a shadowy pelt, too hard to make out, but the other's fur shone silver, unmistakably recognizable. Addertuft followed the shadowy cat down a slope toward the lake. The cat in the lead stopped, turning to scan the moor.
Aspenrose felt her heart sink. Copper eyes flashed in the moonlight. The feelings she had tried to mask spread across her face for the first time in her life. She wanted to curl up in a ball. The bottled up emotions broke free, but she still tried to tuck them away. She had to, for Addertuft.
If Addertuft ever knew, she would give up Jaggedswirl for Aspenrose. Aspenrose couldn't let that happen. She wanted her friend to be happy more than anything.
But she couldn't stop it. The feelings she had hidden for so long swallowed her, threatening to take her down.
Aspenrose couldn't think. She bolted. Aspenrose ran across the moor, picking up speed. Her paws grew lighter, and the wind seemed to carry away her worries. Like shackles being broken, her emotions lifted off her chest, so she kept running. She didn't know where her paws would take her, but she never wanted this to end. She felt she could almost fly.
Then a hard warm wind blew, making Aspenrose's eyes stream with tears. Shadows fell over her, blocking out the silver light. She slowed her pace, glancing up at the sky. A dark gray cloud had covered the shinning moon, blocking out any sign of light.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

[image]

Stars twinkled above the lake territories. The purple sky was dark and beautiful, yet most of it was blotted out by dark heavy clouds. Aspenrose padded over the familiar tree-bridge which led to the Gathering island, where peace was made once every moon.

The black water lapped heavily at the fallen tree. The warm wind rustled the undergrowth on the island. Aspenrose padded into the clearing, the great oak towering in front of her.

She didn't know why her paws had taken her here, she wondered if they just needed... perhaps, peace. Aspenrose scanned the shadowed clearing, recognizing the thorn bush she and the other medicine cats usually sat near during Gatherings. Undergrowth and pine trees surrounded the clearing, blocking the edges of the shore from view.

Aspenrose squeezed under the nearest bramble thicket, pushing her way through the thick undergrowth. She wanted to get a glimpse of the sky, for she wasn't used to trees blocking everything out overhead.

She came out on the other side of the undergrowth, thorns tangling in her fur. A small strip of land from the undergrowth to the water was covered with grass, and nearer the water, pebbles lined the shore. Aspenrose stepped over the pebbles to sit with her paws at the water's edge, so that it lapped lazily at her claws.

Aspenrose looked out over lake; she was facing the moor. Between the island and the opposite shore, glowing bugs danced in a group out over the water. Their light reflected on the lake, setting the wonderful scene aglow.

"Fireflies," Aspenrose almost jumped when she heard a voice sound behind her, smooth as honey.

She turned to see the undergrowth rustle, trying to keep calm. A tom padded out of the shadows, making his way slowly toward Aspenrose. She felt herself grow stiff with foreboding, but made herself remain silent.

The tom smelled strongly of ShadowClan, and Aspenrose squinted through the darkness, trying to make out his identity. The tom

padded closer, pebbles clanking softly beneath his paws. He sat beside her, curling his tail neatly over his paws. He didn't meet Aspenrose's gaze but stared out over the lake.
"Beautiful, aren't they?" The tom motioned toward the fireflies.
Aspenrose took the chance of shifting her gaze from the tom to the dancing bugs.
After a moment of sitting beside the mysterious tom, Aspenrose glanced back to meet his gaze for the first time. The clouds moved away from the moon, reveling who this cat was.
His handsome amber eyes glittered; his gray pelt shone silver in the moonlight, and a white patch spotted his chest. Aspenrose recognizes him from Gatherings, but didn't remember his name.
"What are you doing here?" Aspenrose finally broke the silence, voice soft.
The tom gave a small smile. "I could ask you the same thing," he looked back at the lake, and Aspenrose followed his gaze to the fireflies again.
"My name is Darkmoon, if you were wondering," he said warmly. "I needed a break from my Clan."
Aspenrose perked her ears in surprise. *That's why I'm here, too.* She gave a quick glance at Darkmoon, urging him silently to go on.
"My father is Rainstar, and all he wants me to do is follow in his footsteps; become leader after him," Darkmoon explained.
"'Darkstar, leader of ShadowClan,' can you believe it?"
His gaze fell. "But of course *you* wouldn't understand."
Aspenrose felt sympathy flow through her. She wanted to say something, but she remembered her promise to keep her feelings hidden away. She gazed up at the tall tom.
"Actually, I do understand," Aspenrose whispered. Darkmoon returned her gaze, clearly surprised. "My father, Jaywatcher wanted me to become a medicine cat. I didn't want to let him down, so I did. I enjoy it but..."
Aspenrose thought of Addertuft and how happy she was with Jaggedswirl. *Maybe I don't truly want* Jaggedswirl, *but maybe I want what him and Addertuft have* together.
Sympathy showed in Darkmoon's amber gaze, and something more. Aspenrose stared into his eyes, wanting the moment to last forever. She had never met anyone more relatable and understanding. He reminded her of herself.
A hard warm wind blew, and soon the fireflies surrounded them.

The twinkle and glow of yellow set Darkmoon's eyes shinning. Something lit up inside Apsenrose, something she had never experienced before, but she recognized it and embraced it immediately: a small glimmer of hope

Chapter Twenty-Nine

[image]

"Thanks, Aspenrose," Heathermoon mewed beside the cream she-cat.

Aspenrose smoothed out the elder's fresh bedding, nodding in response. The siamese she-cat lay down in her new nest with a grunt.

"You know, it gets a bit lonely in here sometimes," Heathermoon said drowsily. She was already drifting off.

"Fawntail, Brackenpaw, Jaggedswirl," Aspenrose heard the faint yowl of Harestar from outside the den. "Sandheart, Mallowfall, Firepool, and Aspenrose."

Aspenrose trotted quickly out of the old badger set, hastily joining her Clanmates before they left. She caught sight of Mallowfall at the edge of her vision. The brown tabby tom's green eyes flashed with pity.

"I wish you could come. It's my first Gathering as a warrior, I don't want you to miss it," Mallowfall mewed anxiously to his sister, Oliveclaw.

The black tabby cuffed her brother over the ear with her paw. "Mouse-brain! It's not like there won't be more."

Harestar started to walk, Fawntail at his side. Aspenrose followed her Clanmates at the back of the group, stars twinkling above.

Aspenrose took her place beside the other medicine cats, but she stayed at the edge avoiding their gazes. Nearby, a few apprentices chatted loudly.

"So you two actually *like* swimming?" Brackenpaw's mew sounded shocked. The young brown tabby tom bristled with confusion.

A pale ginger she-cat with a white spot on her nose exchanged an amused glance with the other apprentice. "Yes! You should try it."

The other apprentice nodded, a white tom with faint cream stripes. "Like Cherrypaw said, its fun!"

Brackenpaw leaned forward, clearly interested. "So, do you *only* eat fish?"

The white striped apprentice, named Lightpaw, spoke up, "Mostly. But we catch mice and water voles, too."

The young apprentices along with the rest of the gathered cats slowly grew silent. Aspenrose turned her attention to the great oak above.

Doestar stood first, light brown and white pelt glistening in the moonlight. "ThunderClan is thriving. This green-leaf has brought plenty of prey," she turned her gaze to Waterstar, and dipped her head curtly.

The gray flecked she-cat stood, yellow eyes flickering over the cats below. "Prey is running well in RiverClan."

Harestar made his report next, mentioning the new warriors in WindClan, Mallowfall and Oliveclaw. Cheers arose around the island, and when they died down, Rainstar stood.

The gray and white tom looked thin and his fur unkempt. His amber eyes were weary with exhaustion. "ShadowClan has suffered a great loss. Two of our Clanmembers have died, Tigergaze and our deputy Squirrelpelt."

Murmurs of confusion and shock pulsed through the clearing. Aspenrose searched the roots of the oak and realized for the first time that another cat sat in Squirrelpelt's place.

A black tom that sat at the roots raised his voice. "How did they die?" Thornear questioned.

Worry spread over Rainstar's face. "A strange illness I have never seen before..."

Aspenrose watched Redsplash stand beside her. "The symptoms I noticed were vomiting, weakness, and cracked paw pads. I tired every herb I know, but nothing cured them. Birch leaves seemed to help, but it wasn't long before the disease turned fatal." Redsplash's usually bright amber eyes darkened with guilt.

Rainstar proceeded. "We will always honor our lost Clanmates, but ShadowClan stays strong. The illness has seemed to pass And Blizzardflame has been made deputy."

A moment of silence was paid to Tigergaze and Squirrelpelt, but Aspenrose couldn't help but grow stiff with shock.

She was surprised that Rainstar hadn't chose his son, Darkmoon, to become deputy. She remembered what Darkmoon had told her about his father wanting him to follow in his footsteps.

She searched the clearing and found the deep amber eyes she was looking for. His gaze met her's and their eyes locked. His eyes portrayed longing, but Aspenrose turned away, ears burning. She couldn't help but feel something inside her flutter.

Chapter Thirty

[image]

Leaf-fall was nearing. With every passing day, the warm breezes started to turn cool. The leaves on the trees in the forest were starting to turn brilliant shades of oranges and reds. On the moorland, the grass was starting to turn a faded green color, and the heather was less lush.

The sun hid partly behind fluffy white clouds, casting faint shadows over the hills. It was a calm day. There was no wind to rustle the reeds near the bank, or whistle through the heather.

Aspenrose sat beside the fresh-kill pile, picking through it carefully. She searched and soon plucked out a plump mouse. She stared down at the mouse that lay at her paws. *Must have been caught down near the shore, where the grass is still tall.*

Aspenrose was pulled away from her thoughts as a hunting patrol returned to camp. Crookedwing, a ginger she-cat, padded at the lead, a mouse and young rabbit in her jaws. Crystalflame, a russet tabby, helped Jaggedswirl pull a very plump rabbit into camp. Oliveclaw followed, the black tabby carrying a mouse and a blackbird.

Crystalflame's green eyes sparkled as she and Jaggedswirl put the rabbit in the fresh-kill pile. "The Clan will eat well tonight."

Crookedwing grunted. "Don't we always? WindClan is the swiftest around the lake, we *naturally* are good at hunting."

Oliveclaw ran a claw through the dirt, giving a growl. "No Clan could out-hunt *us,"* the young warrior declared.

Aspenrose broke her gaze away as the two cats began to argue about hunting strategies. Addertuft had crossed the clearing, excitement in her hazel eyes. She met Jaggedswirl halfway, and the gray tabby she-cat nuzzled her mate's shoulder. He licked her ears, copper eyes glowing.

Aspenrose caught Addertuft reach up and whisper something in Jaggedswirl's ear. The black and white tom nodded happily.

A yowl came from the Tallrock, the biggest rock in WindClan camp where the leader addressed the Clan. Harestar stood there, his

tail raised and amber eyes beaming. Aspenrose padded to the edge of the gathered cats, taking a seat beside her mentor, Firepool.

"Cats of WindClan," Harestar started. "I've called this meeting because a couple of cats have something important to share."

The leader waved his tail to Jaggedswirl and his daughter, Addertuft. Harestar leaped off of Tallrock, letting Jaggedswirl take his place. Addertuft was about to join him, but the black and white tom gave her an anxious glance, so she sat beside the rock instead.

"Addertuft surprised me the other night," the handsome tom begin. "She took me to the lakeshore and told me something that I thought I never would achieve."

Aspenrose held her breath. The night she had saw them sneaking out together must have been what Jaggedswirl was talking about.

"She's — well, *we're* —" Jaggedswirl glanced down at his mate. "I'm going to be a father."

Cheers of congratulation erupted around the camp. Crystalflame leaped to her paws, covering Addertuft in affectionate licks. Harestar joined his mate in congratulating his daughter and Jaggedswirl. Sandheart padded over to his son giving a proud dip of his head. Duskspots licked Jaggedswirl, her son, over the ears before turning to congratulate Addertuft.

Cats crowded around them, giving them mews of congratulation. Aspenrose stayed where she was, paws frozen to the ground. The bottled up feelings inside her rose up, threatening to bubble out of her. But she remembered her nighttime visits with Darkmoon, and the glimmer of hope returned inside her drowning out her doubts and fear.

She smiled weakly, bounding over to wrap her tail around Addertuft.

Chapter Thirty-One

[image]

A cream cat padded over the familiar bark of the tree-bridge. She gripped the fallen tree with her claws, making her way to the edge, and jumped down to land in soft sand. Aspenrose pushed through the brambles, ice blue eyes searching the clearing.

The Great Oak caught her eye, it's ancientness drawing her in. Many Clan leaders, moons upon moons, had sat in its branches, giving news to fellow Clans. She padded up to it, peering up into its great canopy.

Aspenrose leaped onto the trunk, gripping tightly with her claws to the thick bark. She hesitated, plucking a memory from her mind. Cedarroar was showing off his climbing skills, using his powerful muscles to haul himself up. Aspenrose pulled herself upwards, giving her best effort.

Finally, she reached a low branch. She perched there, looking out over the island, amazed. She was so high up, she could feel the breeze tug at her fur, leaving her teetering on the sturdy branch. *So* this *is what it feels like to be a leader.*

As she was looking peacefully out over the island, something landed on the branch beside her which fell from above. Startled, Aspenrose almost lost her balance. She turned to see a familiar gray cat peering at her with amused eyes. Aspenrose felt her ears grow hot. She had almost forgotten why she was even here, to meet up with Darkmoon again.

Aspenrose met his light amber gaze. All around her, as the cool breeze blew, orange leaves fell lightly to the ground. It was a wonderful experience. The wind picked up slightly, swirling the leaves around them.

It felt like an eternity before Darkmoon broke the peaceful silence. "I've never met anyone like you before, Apsenrose."

Aspenrose felt warmth wash over her, feeling comforted to have someone like Darkmoon to share nighttime visits with. Aspenrose purred for the first time in moons. *I'm safe here.*

"I've been meaning to tell you," Darkmoon's voice was calm and his gaze was steady. "I like you, Aspenrose, a lot. I can't imagine life

without you beside me."

Mixed emotions poured through Aspenrose. Longing, fear, anxiety. The feelings raked her like an icy claw, but she dare not reveal them. She glanced up at him again, face emotionless. Darkmoon leaned forwards. Aspenrose stiffened, but she dare not draw away. "I want you to come with me, Aspenrose, to ShadowClan," his gaze was filled with longing. "We can be together there. I could teach you how to be a warrior."

Without thinking, Aspenrose replied. "But how could that work?" She stated. "Being a medicine cat is my *calling.* Besides if I left to another Clan *again*...what would every cat think? WindClan is my home..."

Although it pained her, and she noticed the glimmer of doubt pass though Darkmoon's eyes, she knew every word she spoke was true. She couldn't be with Darkmoon. Or *any* cat for that matter.

Darkmoon returned her gaze, expression desperate. "But I love you, Aspenrose," he dropped his gaze to his paws, one white. "I always have."

She felt as though she was just plunged into ice-cold water. The frozen tang hit her like waves, drowning out the rest of the world. A memory glimpsed past, though faint, still clear as morning dew. She closed her eyes, drawing the familiarity of the vision.

She met handsome copper eyes in the moonlight, but something drew her away. Amber eyes watched her from the corner of her vision, sparkling with a familiar feeling...

Realization dawned on Aspenrose. *Darkmoon has liked me for a long time, I just had never noticed. Just like Jaggedswirl never noticed me...*

Darkmoon reached out with his tail, trying to comfort her. Aspenrose recoiled, letting the pain show in her icee eyes for the first time ever. Darkmoon flinched, as if raked by sharp claws.

"I — I can't," Aspenrose whispered. "I'm sorry."

Without waiting for a reply, she leaped from the tree. Landing clumsily, she staggered to her paws, dashing from the oak tree.

Before she reached the undergrowth, she gave one last glance back. Darkmoon stood at the foot of the oak, tail raised. His jaws parted, but Aspenrose turned her head forwards again. She didn't know what he had said, until a soft breeze blew, carrying his words on the wind.

I'm sorry too.

Chapter Thirty-Two

[image]

The wind blew, hard. The pale green grass swayed and dipped. The heather was slowly thinning as the season rolled on. There was no sun to be seen, for an overcast sky loomed overhead.

A cream cat sat alone at the shore. The water rippled in small waves, lapping fiercely at the pebbles. She stared down at her reflection.

Her once bright ice-blue eyes had faded overtime. Her expression held nothing, eyes blank of emotion. She was broken, shadowed by a dark presence.

The wind gave the water another ripple, making her reflection distorted and misshapen. She was almost unrecognizable, and she glanced away, peering blankly at the island on the other side of the lake.

Another hard wind blew from behind the she-cat, blowing her fur around her face. As the wind died down, a familiar voice carried words softly on the breeze. *If the wind blows and a Swirling storm shall cover the Moon, seek answers where your heart truly lies,* Driftfrost seemed to whisper in her ear.

Aspenrose closed her eyes, breathing deeply, before opening them upon the lake again. *I know what it means, now.* Ever since the last time she saw Darkmoon, the prophecy she had once doubted finally seemed clear. With sunrises of thinking, she had began to put the pieces into place.

If the wind *blows.* Aspenrose peered down at her reflection again. *The wind must be me, and "when it blows" is when I ran from Darkmoon.* She gazed at herself still, giving her tail-tip a small flick.

A Swirling storm shall cover the Moon. Aspenrose gave a quick glance at the gray sky. It seemed as if a real storm was on its way. As she looked up, a rain drop splattered on her ear. She flicked it off self-concisely. *The "Swirling storm" is Jaggedswirl. The "Moon" is Darkmoon.*

Aspenrose blinked. *Jaggedswirl covered Darkmoon, the Moon, that night I left him.* Everything was starting to fall into place, but there was still the other half of the prophecy that hadn't been

fulfilled.

Seek answers where your heart truly lies. Aspenrose returned her icy gaze to the lake. The wind picked up once more, buffeting the grass around her. She gave a slight shiver.

Something caught her eye. She turned her head to see something small and white blowing toward her along the shoreline. It reached her, brushing her paws on its way. *A white rose petal*.

Almost as soon as it had came, the petal whipped its way out of reach, swirling around her. The wind changed directions; the pure white rose petal floated lazily on the wind, swirling out over the lake, until it dropped gracefully, swaying until it gently reached the water.

Aspenrose gazed at it, not knowing what it think. *Where* does *my heart truly lie?*

Chapter Thirty-Three

[image]

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was faint light blue, and the sun smiled down on the lake. A very gentle breeze softly stirred the faded green grass.

Aspenrose sat beside the stream that marked the ThunderClan border. Addertuft lay beside her, paws tucked neatly underneath her. Her white-tipped tail was curled lazily around Aspenrose.

She stared blankly at the stream in front of her. It trickled peacefully down into the lake. She blinked, before glancing down at Addertuft.

The gray tabby and white she-cat had closed her eyes, basking in the rays of the sun. Her belly was round with her kits. They would be born in about a moon. Aspenrose gazed fondly at her napping friend.

She wrapped her tail over Addertuft's shoulders, pulling her closer. Addertuft nuzzled her nose into Aspenrose's shoulder. For once in a long while, Aspenrose felt warmth tug at her heart, and she felt wanted; loved. She never wanted this moment to end, but she was afraid that it might have to.

•*•*•*•*•*•*•

A crescent moon crept slowly into the cloudless sky, setting the moorland shinning silver. The night was still, only the crickets chirped softly.

Aspenrose sat on the small rise that overlooked her beloved Clan camp. Her icy eyes were turned to slits in the darkness; her tail twitched calmly.

She turned, silent as a whisper, away from her home. Everything seemed calm now, everything seemed fine. Though in her head, Aspenrose knew everything wasn't truly fine. It never was, it never had been.

She reflected on her life in the Clans, living around the lake. Her journey started in ThunderClan, but she ended up where she belonged, in WindClan. *Where do I belong now?* She had questioned. *Nowhere, perhaps.*

She had always wondered what adventure lay beyond Clan borders.

Aspenrose took a deep breath, urging herself to pad on. She could almost feel the starry presence of Driftfrost beside her, almost hear his comforting voice.
She had reached the edge of WindClan territory, and she was ready. Aspenrose gave one last glance at what had been her home; where her family and friends stayed. It pained her to leave them behind, but she felt like she had no other choice.
"Goodbye," it felt like the one, simple word held an eternity of meaning. A weight lifted from deep inside her chest.
She turned to the open moor ahead, welcoming its beauty and unfamiliarity, and bounded toward the unknown adventure that awaited her.

Epilogue

[image]

A stiff breeze rustled the treetops. Pine needles scattered the ground. Although it was near the end of leaf-fall, the pine trees were still full and lush.
At the edge of the pine forest, at the shore of the lake, sat a gray tom. His light amber gaze flickered to the starry sky above. His gaze portrayed every emotion inside him.
He knew, though, for the sake of his Clan that he had to move on. He had to follow in his father's footsteps. He had to give his love to his mate and kit.
His heart ached as he remembered another cat, but he couldn't ever let Dovemist or his kit know about her. He loved them, no doubt, but he couldn't help long for what could have been with the cream she-cat with icy blue eyes that held nothing, and everything. He picked out a star in the sky that stared down on him, shinning brighter than the rest.
•*•*•*•*•*•*•
A faint, dry breeze rustled the yellow grass. Dawn light filtered through the branches of the gorse bush. A gray tabby and white she-cat lay with her tail curled around two bundles of fur.
A black and white tom sat beside her, licking her ears gently. His copper eyes shone with affection. "What shall we name them?"
The mother studied her kits with loving hazel eyes, before reaching down to touch the white tom with her nose. "How about Puddlekit?"
The father stroked the gray tabby she-cat's side with his tail approvingly. "Lovely," he responded.
The she-cat took a moment to gaze at the gray and white she-kit. She thought for a heartbeat longer, before giving a small smile, as though remembering times of the past.
She touched the she-kit lightly with her tail. "Rosekit," she finally whispered. "After a dear friend of mine, who never understood how many cats really loved her."
The gray tabby pulled her kits close, never wanting to let go.

Author's Note/Q&A

[image]

Well, that's that! I really hope you enjoyed this Warriors fanfiction as much as I enjoyed writing it. I feel like I've defiantly grown as a writer from the beginning of the story until now. Let me know what you guys thought of Aspenrose's journey and how it ended. Feel free to ask questions about the story in the comments, and I will gladly answer them.
~Aspen